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Prologue

The sun dips low in the sky, ducking behind the hills and casting red, orange, and yellow across the wide sky. A paw shifts into vision, unsheathed claws scraping the smooth stone below. *"No."*

No. *No.*

The tom laughs heartfully, eyes shining with a mixture between shock and amusement. No. That word hadn't been uttered to him since he started ruling this clan, this kingdom. No.

"No? Oh really?" he questions coldly, body shaking with laughter, "No?"

The she-cat stands over three small, shuffling bodies. Her tail is tucked between her legs, brushing protectively over their small forms.

"No," She repeats, louder, clearer, "not again." The tom cackles, unable to contain himself. This is *funny*. Hilarious, even.

"I don't care what you want," the tom spits sharply, "this is for the best, the best that you *focus."*

The she-cat's throat goes abruptly dry, and she feels an idea coming on. First, she forces her posture calm, and she pushes down her bristling fur. "Fine," she all but whispers, "but I'll tell the whole kingdom. All four clans. I'll tell every cat."

The tom freezes, eyes wide. His fur bristles. "I'd kill you, just like those kits."

The she-cat's eyes flash with fear, which she quickly tries to bury. "I know you won't." The tom cat smirks.

"Oh really?"

The tom-cat steps forward, shifting his paws so that his claws glimmer in the moonlight. The she-cat feels adrenaline pump through her, and she flicks her long plumed tail.

And with one paw, she raises her claws and rakes them across the tom's muzzle.

He reels back, surprise mixing with anger. The she-cat breaths heavy, hiccuping, breathes. The male cat blinks, scoffing at the blood welling from the cut. He smirks.

"Fine," he says slowly, "you've won."

You've won.

The she-cat curls her thickened tail around her kits. He's lying. He always does. "Leave now, please." The begging is pathetic, but in a way the she-cat feels victorious, like the tom's words hold any truth.

The father of the three blink at the queen's harsh words, as though the previous scene had never happened. And then he purrs. "What are their names?"

The she-cat nearly gasps, but she sucks it back. "I'm not telling you." The tom grins as if they were apprentices again. As if the alliance had never occurred.

"They *are* still my kits," he says slowly, threateningly, "and whatever you do, I will get to them."

Information!

CREDITS

hi! the original warriors series belongs to Erin Hunter and her team, but the story line and characters belong to me! however, the prompt for this book comes from (@_patches) and I think you should read her works if your looking for something good and hooking to read!

THUNDERCLAN

A destruction of the normal structures of the clan cause a war (relevant to plot later) and every cat joins under ThunderClan. This ThunderClan has lost all it's care, and it's hungry for more power.

Otherwise ThunderClan is pretty much like the same. Wooded territory, normal prey types. For those who don't know, ThunderClan feasts on squirrels, mice, birds, and live in a forest camp. In this scenario a scenic forest clearing decorated with various things!

BY

MintTiga

Other side

Allegiance

THUNDERCLAN

Rulers

Snapstar- an orange tabby tom with piercing green eyes and a long scar on his muzzle.

Aloestar- a snow-white she-cat with a limp and long scars.

Royal kits

Sagekit- an almost all white tom with a few scattered orange tabby splotches and green eyes.

Smoothkit- a small, lithe, she-kit with orange tabby markings and blue eyes.

Flickerkit- a large tom with all white fur and blue eyes.

Medicine cat

Tumblecry- a small, short, she-cat with a graying muzzle and soft hazel eyes.

Warriors

Crevicewhisker- a small gray she-cat with a long plumed tail and golden eyes.

Fringestrike- a sleek white she-cat with big ears and a missing tail.

Cracklight- an orange tabby with small orange eyes.

Orejump- a large, wide-set, black tom with unnaturally small ears.

Cliffstoop- a long-furred she-cat with small, dainty, paws and orange eyes.

apprentice; Fallowpaw

Cedarmist- a cinnamon tom with a missing paw, and notched ear.

Minnowrose- A female spry senior warrior with mostly white fur except for ears dappled black.

apprentice; Yewpaw

Frigidcall- a white and black spotted senior tom with green and blue eyes.

Apprentices

Yewpaw- a yellow tom with shining green eyes.

Fallowpaw- a solid brown she-cat with large reddish-brown eyes.

Queens

Ferretsqueak- a brown and white splotched she-cat with blue eyes.

Kits; Cleftkit, Ivykit, Whitekit.

Cleftkit- an all black tom-kit with greenish turquoise eyes.

Ivykit- A black and white she-kit with sleek fur and blue eyes.

Whitekit- an all white kit with a black tail tip and pale green eyes.

Elders

Quailflinch- a white and black dotted she-cat with a frail build and milky, blind, eyes.

Branchheart- a pale brown tom with a short, stubby tail.

RIVERCLAN

Deputy

Turtlesplash- a calico she-cat with many scars and one missing eye.

Medicine cat

Diveflick- a dark brown tom with a missing tail and a claw mark over his yellow eyes.

Warriors

Reedwind- a ragdoll she-cat with long, feather-y, fur.

Eddysnap- a blue-furred she-cat with seemingly infinitely messy fur.

Weedfrown- a grumpy black tom with a long tail and flopping ears.

Eelslip- a dark gray tom with a missing ear and a crooked smile along with golden eyes.

apprentice; Wavepaw

Swanscreech- an all white she-cat with piercing blue eyes.

Puddlesnarl- a light brown tom with a small, meek, appearance and icy blue eyes.

Larchleap- a large tom with bright orange eyes and a scar running down his side.

Apprentices

Wavepaw- a small, lithe, black she-cat with sparse fur and green eyes.

Queens

Podcall- a black she-cat with soft green eyes.

Pondscour- a black she-cat with a long, plumed, tail and pale blue eyes.

Kits; Echokit, Blossomkit.

Echokit- a blue tom with short, curly, fur.

Blossomkit- a diluted tortoiseshell she-kit with copper eyes.

SHADOWCLAN

Deputy

Fernflick- a big she-cat with sharp brown eyes and large eye bags.

Medicine cat

Daisylight- a small, old, cream she cat with tired blue eyes.

apprentice; Firpaw

Warriors

Bloomwhisper- a young cream she-cat with bright, shining, green eyes.

Eaglesnap- an all white tom with long, plumy, fur and golden eyes.

Funnelspin- an excitable she-cat with blue-tinted gray fur and piercing brown eyes.

Molesnap- a brown tom with permanent eye bags sitting under green eyes.

apprentice; Parsleypaw

Sapphirefoot- a sleek blue she-cat with a long tail and golden eyes.

Ospreyhook- a wide-set tom warrior with gray fur and green eyes.

Whirlcrash- a young tortoiseshell she-cat with piercing blue eyes.

Antblink- a blue-eyed very light gray she-cat with a missing ear.

Apprentices

Parsleypaw- a gray she-cat with plumy long fur and large pale green eyes.

Queens

Juniperjump- a small, quick, she-cat with cream fur and deep blue eyes.

kit; Cragkit

Cragkit- a tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

Dappledawn- a well-groomed white she-cat with brown splotches.

Elders

Logtail- a large tom with blue eyes and many scars.

WINDCLAN

Deputy

Voidflicker- an all black tom with long, curled, claws and one green eye.

Medicine cat

Yellowleaf- an old gray tom with a white sheen to his fur from age.

apprentice; Foxpaw

Warriors

Larkfoot- a silver bengal she-cat with brown eyes and a snaggle tooth.

Silkfur- a long-furred white she-cat with pale green eyes.

Creekzip- a cinnamon and white swirled tom with big hazel eyes.

Gorseslip- a lithe tan tom with a long tail and big ears.

Brittleleaf- a small calico she-cat with a severe limp and small blue

eyes.

Trunkjump- a dark brown tom with piercing golden eyes.

Cloverdawn- a diluted tortoiseshell she-cat with large green eyes and a missing tail.

Apprentices

Foxpaw- a ginger tabby tom with green eyes.

Queens

Sedgespark- a light gray she-cat with pale green eyes.

Kits; Tansykit, Lilykit, Scarletkit

Tansykit- A brown and black tom with bengal markings.

Lilykit- A calico she-kit with blue eyes and long fur.

Scarletkit- a reddish brown she-kit with wide, blue eyes and a long tail.

Chapter 1

Sagekit sees it all around him. Blood. Wet, sickly, blood. The scent of iron crams into his nostrils, flooding him.

Bodies pile up, crimson red leaking from them. The smell of death is strong, overpowering, as Sagekit cowers.

Accusing eyes stare, shining blue. Sagekit stares at the pair, eyes wide, and sees his blood-stained fur reflected.

A realization dawns painfully on Sagekit. It hurts, burns, and he can't stand it.

This is his doing.

~~~

Sagekit blinks, going from darkness to icy blue eyes. They shine with excitement intertwined with persistence.

Sagekit knows he can't deny those eyes. Flickerkit. The littlest of them all, the almost still-born. The arguably most persuasive kit in all of camp. Sagekit can't deny those eyes. He smiles at them instead.

"Flickerkit," he mumbles sleepily, eyes soft, "what is it?"

The den is dimly lit, warm sunlight crawling into the den from its opening. Flickerkit fidgets with excitement.

"Aloestar's gone," he whispers, voice implying what he wants, "Ca-"

"What are you two up to?" Smoothkit's voice cuts sharply into the two tom-kit's conversation. Sagekit twists in his nest, eyes blinking at his sister.
~~~

"Shh," he mumbles nervously, "we want to explore." Smoothkit's eyes widen with mischievousness and excitement, and her tail lashes.

"Yes!"

Smoothkit hops from her nest, eyes glinting in the dim sunlight. Her little claws sink smoothly into the moss and grouse feathers from WindClan.

WindClan. Sagekit feels strange at the name. A mix between good and guilty. His fur twitches with discomfort, and his green eyes blink slowly.

"Okay," the tom kit enunciates slowly, shaking the remnants of the dream and the thought off of him. His full attention should be on his escape.

"So," Smoothkit whispers, "Mother says we can't be seen for a few more moons."

"Yeah," Sagekit adds quickly, "it's tradition."

"So we won't," Flickerkit's small shoulders shrug easily, not a hint of nervousness in his posture.

The small tom clearly doesn't notice the danger. His plumed tail flicks nonchalantly. "We're going to be alright."

Sagekit isn't worried about that. He knows if he *does* get caught, he'll get off the hook easily. Snapstar makes it that way. Aloestar has told them their father loves them, dearly so, but he is busy. Never around.

Sagekit nods profusely. Of course they will.

And then he huffs.

"What?" Smoothkit asks, voice dripping with confusion. Sagekit draws a claw through the dirt.

"Aloestar makes a big deal of Snapstar not being around, but she's

never here," he snaps irritably. The den is silent for a moment, before Smoothkit straightens her back proudly.

"Yeah," she agrees, "consider this her punishment."

"Yeah!" Flickerkit's tail shoots up proudly.

The kits quiet again, they're minds swirling with possibilities. Finally, Sagekit flicks his tail.

"I know," he announces, "we can just tour camp. I mean, if we want a *real* punishment for Mom, we should make sure everyone sees us."

Smoothkit brightens at the idea, and Flickerkit grins. And a plan is born.

The kits will walk into the middle of camp and flaunt their pelts and eyes, grinning at Aloestar. "She probably will be too busy complaining about Snapstar," Smoothkit adds sourly. Then Aloestar will see she's made a mistake.

The kits creep from the den with this idea bubbling in their heads. Soft paws pad from stone to dirt to green. Green grass. Green, springy grass.

Sagekit expects an intervention. A paw to come shooting from the sky, to plant itself in front of the group. To claw him from the ground, to send him writhing into the sky. For a voice, deep and loud, to yell at him, scold him for getting out.

But there is nothing. A bleak nothing. Sagekit pauses, waiting for something. *Anything.* But there is no punishment, no cat ushering them back into the leader's den. Sagekit blinks in surprise, feeling Smoothkit's rough nose repeatedly lodging itself into his side.

"Come on, you scaredy mouse! Already backing out?" her condescending tone makes Sagekit's fur bristle with anger.

"I-of course not! Shut your muzzle, mange-pelt."

Smoothkit snorts at the insult, only bothering to roll her eyes. Her tail doesn't lash, a breathy huff doesn't escape from her mouth. She

shows no sign of humoring Sagekit, and for some reason it makes him annoyed.

Sagekit lashes his tail in his sister's face and creeps silently forward. He is good at this. Better than good, in fact. He can't hear himself walking. While Flickerkit's steps are not nosy, they are soft thumps that it worries Sagekit to hear.

Sagekit takes one step. Then another. He slithers like an adder, lean body now fully out of the den. His eyes adjust to the bright light, blinking repeatedly, before he looks around.

From his crouched position, Sagekit can't see much. Stones chiseled into blocks by persistent clawing stand in the way of his vision. But from what he *can* see it is hilly, some-what at least, and grassy. Trees poke over the walls, large and green, and their scent is earthy and amazing.

"Wow," Smoothkit whispers, mouth agape. Flickerkit's eyes widen as a gentle breeze tugs at his fur, and he grins.

"Outside," he nods, "It's so..."

"Vibrant," Sagekit finishes eagerly, "I'm so excited." Smoothkit nods in agreement, Flickerkit only gazing up at the baby blue sky.

Looking around once more, Sagekit gathers himself. So what if the outside world is too beautiful, too new? So what if it is *so* big, too big for Sagekit? He will grow into it. He will.

Sagekit creeps forward, small steps silent. His moves his tail up confidently. The three kits make their ways further, further, into the stone, until the wall is close enough to touch with a paw. Sagekit inhales the smell.

The aromas are mingled with one another, all cats. Some carry prey, as the kits tell from the scent of warm blood. They stare, wide-eyed, at each other.

The air is silent, almost eerie, as the kits creep along the wall, tails down and unsure. Their pelts bristle nervously, their tiny bodies pressed together in an anxious flock.

"Look!" Flickerkit lightly nudges his brother. Sagekit looks, but only for a moment. The wall has left them. The nudge sends him unbalanced. Unbalanced and wobbling. Wobbling turns into a trip over his paws. And a trip sends him reeling.

To the ground.

Down. Down, down, *down-*

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hi! hope y'all enjoy the first chapter so far! that's really all :)
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Chapter 2

It feels strange, actually, to die.

Like falling into white nothingness, like peace, and then a jolt, a switch of gears, and then panic and pain. Like water flooding into your lungs and you sputter and spit but you just can't cough it up. Water streaming into your ears and you hear a few muffled screams.

"Sagekit! Sagekit!"

And then more pain, way more, like that first jolt. Sagekit twitches, only twitches, at it.

The seering pain turns into memories of a short life. Like his life, splayed out in a picture book to look and sort through.

His first memory of milk and squirming bodies, his little wobbly steps, when Aloestar struck him across the face for playing moss ball in the den. Happy moments, like Smoothkit and Flickerkit, who feels distant now. Sad moments, like hearing Aloestar say Snapstar didn't care about them.

And finally, at the very end, paws slipping on slick stone and, eyes wide, falling closer and closer. The snap ringing in his ears, his neck probably, deafening. Sagekit feels peace after that, a wave of calm, and he allows himself to float down into the white void.

The white fog clears slightly, giving way to a grassy plain.

A starry she-cat sits, eyes boring into the kit, a few fox-lengths in

front of him. She's a tortoiseshell, fur glimmering beautifully. Her eyes shine, stars embedded within them, and she blinks at him.

"Dear kit," she coos, "come. Closer." Her tail beckons Sagekit, and so he takes a singular step.

"Am I dead-" The question is cut off with the she-cat shaking her head vigorously, smiling softly.

"You are only a kit," she speaks gently, ducking her head, "you have been taken pity on..." The she-cat pauses, something vicious flashing in her eyes.

"Against my will. You will cause much trouble for the clans," the starry she-cat soft tone morphs into one of anger and fear, "your path is laid down already. You will never change, ever. I've seen your future, child, and I think you should too."

Sagekit opens his mouth to ask his bubbling questions, confused, but the she-cat fades quickly.

For a few moments it is silent, still, before it explodes.

With battle screeches and snarls a sea of cats leaps forward out of the trees. The army is big, huge, but the other is bigger. It looks like hundreds of thin, less muscled, cats sink their fangs into the other cats. Blood rises. It stains the battle field.

And suddenly, Sagekit is ripped from the ground where he stands and shoved into another body, inside of the smaller army.

He attacks.

The battle moves are fluid, rehearsed. The first cat he sees is easy to fight. A small, blue, she-cat, is knocked out of his way. A real urge to fight some cat, some cat he will know if he just sees them, is strong. Sagekit pushes through the crowd, claws raking at him, but they don't hurt.

The battle roars in his ears and he hates it. Hates it so much.

"Is this what you want?"

Sagekit can't even think before he is ripped out of the dream-like space and thrown into consciousness.

~~~

Blood is still sticky on the tom-kit's pelt when his eyes blink open. Images of red flash in his vision, along with a pair of deep blue eyes, piercing and unforgiving.

"Scarlet-" Sagekit gasps, surprised at his own voice. It vibrates his throat painfully, sending shocks of discomfort through him. The tom's mouth quickly clicks shut.

"Sagekit!"

A body stirs beside the kit, nudging him a bit. Sagekit startles, but silently so, as he blinks at the form in front of him.

Smoothkit's eyes glitter like gems, tears welling at the bottom. Her voice sounds hiccuping and pained, but her upturned mouth tells a different story.

"You were... Your neck-"

Another larger form presses its way into Sagekit's limited line of vision. The scent is new, arid, like herbs and plants. Under there, though, is a she-cat. Sagekit squeaks out a small hiccuping cough, before blinking his eyes lovingly at his sister.

The herb-smelling she-cat nudges the kit out of the den, however, gently. "Get Aloe and Snapstar. Tell them the good news," she murmurs in a soft voice. Smoothkit turns back, tail twitching in annoyance.

"But I-"

"Don't you want Flickerkit to know? Go, now."

Sagekit opens his mouth to protest, to say he just wants Smoothkit right now. Someone, in the very least. But a strangled gurgling sound escapes, like he's choking. Smoothkit turns her soft, concerned, eyes on her brother, but is nudged out of the den.
~~~

"I'll tell Aloestar, " Smoothkit calls disdainfully, though her voice is lined with skittishness. The medicine cat only leans upward and blinks her glowing hazel eyes at Sagekit.

In the dim, near dark, den, they glow beautifully. And pierce Sagekit, pinning him still and silent like dead prey. "What did you see?"

"What?" Sagekit croaks, confused. His blinding headache smears the words into incoherent mush. What is that supposed to mean? He technically saw nothing. Almost. And what does she care about a nightmare? It makes no sense.

"In your dream," she says roughly, "you kept murmuring a name. What did you see?"

Time pauses, releasing only for Sagekit to realize what she is asking. For the details of her dream. Or nightmare. Or both.

"I don't know," he answers honestly. The tom-kit doesn't. It seems like a dream, really. Being a warrior, his greatest dream. Fighting, something that sends a strange thrill into his mind just at the thought.

But the thought of hurting is horrible. At the same time, however, hurting is the only option. Like biting off your own infected tail. Something the tom's instincts so strongly advise against, but feels like it must be done.

The she-cat, who Sagekit presumes is the medicine cat, narrows her glowing irises. "You do. You know. Tell me." The voice is rough, demanding, and Sagekit flinches at the icy coldness of it.

"I don't know," Sagekit murmurs. A fear stirs, seizing the tom's chest. His fur bristles.

For many quiet moments hazel and green pools lock, staring into each other, before the medicine cat narrows them and turns away.

"Whatever," she mumbles, "You suffered head trauma and a snapped leg bone." The she-cat whisks around, paw out stretched. It holds brown spheres, like balls. They smell bitter, and definitely

unappetizing.

"Poppy seeds," the she-cat says flatly, rolling the beads in front of Sagekit's nose, "lick them up. They taste better than most herbs."

Hesitant and still a little spooked, Sagekit leans forward and licks up the herbs. Instantly, the taste springs upon him. A not quite gross but unpleasant nutty taste accompanies a soft crunching sound. The beads dissipate into Sagekit's empty feeling stomach.

Instantly, a calm washes over the tom-kit. The pain slips away a bit later, making all of Sagekit serene and tranquil. His limbs, even the one once sending pain shooting up his whole upper body, relax and go limp.

Sagekit hardly resists sleep, though he yearns for his parents warm pelt. The tom snuggles into his nest, imagining some cat curling around him.

As warmth sinks in, Sagekit blinks his eyes closed and waits for sleep. The tom slips into slumber thinking about how much he wants his mother.

~~~

why wouldn't the medicine cat treat it and wait so long??? maybe it's relevant to plot (or maybe I made a mistake and wrote it into the plot)

enjoy the chapter regardless!
~~~

Chapter 3

The sleep is short and dreamless, peaceful, almost, until a paw prods Sagekit in the gut.

A pair of new eyes greet him, icy green eyes. They blink.

Sagekit recognizes the pattern of a cat talking, but not who that cat is and what they can be saying.

A gear shifts, and everything comes into focus, muffled but there.

"-such sons? The white one is unfit. This one is hurt. The other is a she-cat. Starclan, how bad c-" and the connection breaks.

Sagekit can hear liquid sloshing in his head, and his headache seems splitting. It worsens with every breath and demands all of Sagekit's attention.

However, though it hurts horribly, Sagekit recognizes those green eyes. And that voice, that rough, unkind voice. It seems soft in this light, though, Sagekit realizes. He can *not* mess this up.

"Dad-" the tom kit pauses, knowing that isn't the right word, "Snapstar. I'm awake." Sagekit cracks open an eye to prove it.

Snapstar blinks his own, eyes narrowed. "I see that," he says slowly, almost ruefully. He smiles a bit, more like a little smirk. "I'm so glad to meet you. Your name?" Sagekit takes a moment to digest this.

"Sagekit," he stammers out, the burning in his throat worth it, "I

look like you. Do I?" Snapstar smiles a bit wider, snickering.

"Not much," the much older tom smiles, "just those eyes. They're just like mine." Sagekit grins a toothy smile, green eyes wide to show their true effect.

"Y-yeah. I think... I bet so!" Sagekit squeaks, excited, "So your like...leader of ThunderClan?" Snapstar nods.

"That and ruler of much more," the tom speaks, chest puffing out in pride, "I'm glad to have you as a son."

Sagekit smiles weakly at the words. He is stoked, no matter how rehearsed the sentence feels. Did Snapstar say that to Flickerkit? Is he special? The questions swirl, only one getting answered.

"This clan is great, and I entrust you with it. I am the ruler, and you, my successor.

~~~

"Really?" Flickerkit's little voice pipes, almost disappointed, "but are you ready? Tumblecry says-"

Sagekit is too excited to be weary of the opportunity. Snapstar, the cat he'd seen once before, just deemed him a prince. He'd be a king, a ruler, over this clan. *His* clan.

"I have no care what Tumblecry says," Sagekit lifts his nose, "I don't have to, do I? The only cat I'll listen to is Snapstar. He's my mentor, he says."

Smoothkit looks more angry, while Flickerkit looks a bit let down. "Not even us? Are you too good for us, now, because Snapstar made an impulsive choice?" Smoothkit's voice rings with betrayal.

"That's not what I meant!" Sagekit exclaims, struggling with a wince from his nest. His broken leg, a stick attached with grass and cobweb, sticks out uncomfortably to his side. "I still need you guys. You know that."

"Yeah," Smoothkit murmurs, unconvinced clearly.
~~~

It isn't like that, Sagekit thinks, almost annoyed, *they should know that.* But they don't. It is clear, as the siblings share no more words before slinking from the dim den.

Sagekit snorts. Fine then. *Leave, be no better than what your mad at.* The tom kit rolls his deep green eyes, thoughts wandering to the pair of blue eyes.

The dreams are not very confusing, all of death and battle, but the eyes are. So important, so vital, something Sagekit wants desperately to get close to. Something that makes Sagekit so scared, so angry, so confused all at the same time. Their irises, a stunning blue. Almost shockingly so. The pupil, like a button in the middle, dilated and scared. Sagekit can't look away.

No. This is nothing to think about now. Sagekit blinks away the thoughts, sinking deeper and deeper into the moss of his nest. Whatever about the eyes. Whatever about Smoothkit.

Unexpectedly, Sagekit's little claws sink straight through the moss at the moss. *She's just jealous,* Sagekit thinks crossly. But Flickerkit too... Sagekit blinks sadly. He shouldn't be jealous. He never is. They never fight. And yet... They are.

Whatever about...

Sagekit struggles to get the thought out. He frowns deeply, brushing it away like a fly. Whatever about everything. He's a king. What does it matter about his littermates?

"Sagekit?" A voice arrives at the entrance of the den, a spry muscled form accompanying the welcoming voice. "Hello?"

Sagekit plasters a grin onto his face, even if his mind swirls with excuses to get out of talking to this cat. "Yes, Snapstar?"

Snapstar slips into the den, smiling toothily. "Sagekit," he purrs smoothly, "I have some cats I'd like you to meet." Sagekit brightens. What other cats have he met except his family and Tumblecry, after all?

"Who?" the kit asks excitedly. Snapstar smiles easily.

"Ivykit. She is highly looked upon," he explains, nudging Sagekit out of his nest, "she's Aloestar's niece, after all. And talented too." Snapstar nods, clearly in thought.

Sagekit brightens with excitement, nearly leaping to his paws. "Okay! Okay!" he chants, wobbling out of his nest, "right... right! A she-cat? Will she be a warrior?"

Snapstar frowns, looking thoughtful. "It isn't in tradition. She-cats shouldn't be warriors," he tsks, "You must learn that. But some slip past me, I admit. Four of them. Fallowpaw is who we will visit afterwards. I wish to show you something."

Sagekit's ears prick in curiosity, paws shuffling nervously. Snapstar eyes him sternly, thought, and the thought that the leader might decide to pick some other kit to be his successor drives his head to nod.

"Okay, I'll come."

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pumping out chapters for winter break <3 boring to write and read in my opinion tho. things will pick up soon though!
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Chapter 4-

Sagekit can't mess this up. He can't mess anything up. Ever.

The pressure is crushing. Sagekit hobbles out of the den, his leg stiff and sore, and his stomach fluttering with nerves. Cold air ruffles his pelt like he is a leaf hanging feebly to a dead oak tree. Sagekit shivers.

Snapstar wraps his white-tipped tail around Sagekit, smiling softly. The sun's warm rays shoot down to earth, sending light spread across the camp. Sagekit lets his worries fade into pure amazement, eyes wide.

The camp glows with not only sunlight, but gems encrusted in the sand. Little sprinkles of life are dotted all around. A stray moss ball here, a mouse bone there. Sagekit saw a split second of life beyond the wall before he fell, but not in all it's glory. Not all the rabbit hides, not the sun-warmed rocks a she-cat basks on, not the flower bushes cheered on by the smiling sun.

"Like it, huh?" Snapstar smiles proudly, "I made all of this. I did all of this. For my clan, so we could thrive." Sagekit nods vigorously.

"You know something?" Snapstar now looks annoyed, his tail sweeping the studs of grass, "Aloestar didn't let me name you, or even see you. Do you know how stupid it was for her to argue like a kit about your names? I was going to name you something powerful, righteous, but no. Aloestar didn't like it. She liked passive names, names weak. Sagekit's the only good one."

Sagekit feels torn between angry and irritated. The voices in his head combat each other. *He just insulted your littermates. Do*

something! One says persistently, *Say something!* But there is another, whispering, mumbling, and then getting louder yet. *He likes you. You've pleased him. He complimented you.*

Though it whispers, it seems deafening, loud, demanding. So Sagekit flashes a big grin, tail curling. "Yeah," he says hoarsely, feeling guilt wash over his little body. His throat clamps shut as the first voice yells at him, scolding. The second voice fades into the battle that takes over his head, gone like it was only a bad influence. Maybe it was.

"This way," Snapstar orders, turning sharply. Sagekit blinks, confused, before stumbling on his aching leg. Snapstar casts him a disappointed look. "This is the nursery," the orange tabby explains, bowing his head under the mess of rock and flower bushes, "you'd go here if you were born to a queen."

"Wasn't I?" Sagekit remembers the old term from when the clans were separated, "I mean Aloestar *did* give birth to me, and nursed me and-" Snapstar shoots Sagekit a threatening look, like all he says is wrong.

"You were born to two rulers, not a *queen,"* the tom corrects gruffly, "Queens are only she-cats who want to be cared for. Kits are only made to love their mothers. Not you though. Your made to lead." The words send a chill into Sagekit, who grins.

"Okay," he squeaks, prancing into the nursery.

The smells are of milk and moss, coating the den in a warm comfort. Sagekit breathes it in as if they might disappear in the next second. Instead, the aroma of kits drifts into the orange and white tabby's nostrils. The intertwined scents stay there, cramping into his nose in a steady stream.

"Ferretsqueak!" Snapstar's booming voice echos off of the stone walls, "I have a visitor."

Almost instantly, a splotchy she-cat walks briskly from a little nook in rock, blinking sleepily. Eye bags weigh down of her otherwise beautiful glinting blue eyes. Stumbling at her paws are three bodies,

about Sagekit's size, yawning and whining.

"Who's Snapstar?" one all white kit asks sleepily.

"Didn't you say 'star' meant big? Like important?" another adds, blinking at Ferretsqueak through squinted eyes.

One kitten is silent, eyeing Sagekit curiously. Her blue eyes mirror her mother's deep, watery, pools. Sagekit flits his gaze across the she-cat's, thin, long body.

"We've come to meet Ivykit," Snapstar says, casting a quick look at the two toms. Ferretsqueak narrows her tired eyes.

"I think if you've come to meet a she-kit, you should take my two toms too," the queen says slowly, as if threatening something. Snapstar narrows his eyes challengingly.

"Didn't you say being a warrior doesn't suit you?" he says quietly, leaning towards the she-cat. Ivykit watches with unblinking eyes, tail bushing with worry.

"She never said that!" the she-kit chirps, bushy tail twitching. In fact, her whole pelt twitches with contempt.

Contempt. That can't be right. Snapstar is an amazing leader. Who would hate him? Perhaps the she-kit is in a bad mood. Her fur doesn't seem groomed thoroughly enough. It spikes out in all directions like a lightning bolt, ruffled with annoyance and... fear?

Snapstar turns to the kit. "Yes, she did," his slow voice fades into a growl of annoyance, tail tip flicking. Ivykit doesn't protest more, only curling her lip and leaning towards Sagekit.

"I hate you."

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dont you just love it when the leader spreads propaganda to a baby? me too!

hope you enjoyed this filler chapter. more exciting things coming
~~~

later!

Chapter 5-

Being told you are hated doesn't sting nearly as much as Sagekit would guess. Ivykit's eyes remain challenging, like daring him to tell, but he won't. And she knows that, it seems.

"Why?" Sagekit breathes as he hears Snapstar make a rude comment about Ferretsqueak being useless at hunting. Ivykit squints.

"It's obvious, isn't it? Your father is..." the she-kit trails off, locking her worried gaze on her mother.

"Mom, I'll just go. I'd like to know another kit. We can walk together," the mew sounds so innocent, but Sagekit grumbles at the blatant lie. Ferretsqueak looks visibly relieved, huffing.

"You two can play moss ball, then," Ferretsqueak flicks her tail at her two tom-kits, "Out now, out of the den." The two toms grin, speeding away. Ivykit is right after them, not talking to Sagekit about any of it. So fine. He'll go.

Sagekit trails after the white and black she-kit, who is surprisingly quick, out of the den.

The sun shines, wrapping everything in warmth. The hot rays send Sagekit purring instantly, pelt twinkling in sunshine. The sand steams, sprouting bristles of green. Some hold flowers. Others sway in the wind. Sagekit stands taller, reaching toward the sun, but it doesn't get any closer.

Ivykit's bony shoulder nudges the tom roughly, sending his purrs away quickly. Sagekit glares at her while she grimaces for a few seconds.

"Your father is a mouse-brain," the she-cat twitches her pelt, speaking lowly, "Did you see him? All big and mighty, all nice and playful, until he doesn't get what he wants. And then he is huge and mean and threatening. And you're going to be just like him."

Sagekit pauses to take this in, pelt bristling with each more and more aggressive word. He can't think of anything strong to say, an argument to make, so he stays quiet. Ivykit lashes her tail, eyes deadly.

"He has to decide if we live, you know? He has to bless kits," Ivykit spits, tone no more softer than last time, "I was marked for *death.* He marked me to *die."*

The words seep into Sagekit slowly, mixing with rage, pure rage. "He likes you though!" the tom says unconvincingly, "You're a promising kit, he said. That's why we should be friends, he said-" Ivykit sneers, snorting disdainfully.

"You *will* be like him! He controls who you're friends with, now? When will you grow up? All of this clan but you know! Even your littermates, for Starclan's sake!" Ivykit's words finally start to sting, and Sagekit bares his teeth.

"What did they say?" he breathes, curiosity clawing him. Ivykit rolls her eyes.

"That they miss you," she spits, "and Snapstar's made you power hungry." Power hungry? How?

"How?" Sagekit breathes, "I don't want power, I just want Snapstar to not view me as a runt. They don't care enough. They're just jealous they won't matter when they grow up. They'll be known as my littermates and nothing else!" The words slip out of his bared teeth, to the dismay of Ivykit.

"Fine," Ivykit wheels her body around, tail flicking, to join her brothers in their game. Sagekit is left alone, seemingly not welcome anywhere.

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Sagekit hobbles along the camp walls, fur being poked by various sizes of brambles. He barely feels the little snags, focusing on the sun-warmed sand and the heavy feeling in his chest. How could his littermates speak in such a way? They are so wrong, so wrong. Just jealous. Just jealous.

The little orange and white tom stops at a large winding crack in the stone. Through the crack is a whole new camp. Sagekit pricks his ears curiously, peering through the slit.

It seems like a whole new world behind the towering stone walls. Cats work silently, making no sound except mutters and shuffles of paws. The felines are thin, some looking like scrawny elders as they shuffle around. The kits don't play. They sort things, moss, prey, gems, rocks. The adults work on their walls, eyes tired. It looks like a prison.

Sagekit watches from the crack, hearing only the din from his camp. No cat sees him from the tiny crack. No cat turns from their designated jobs. Why is no kit playing? Sunning, talking? Why do they all look so sad?

"Shh."

The voice shocks him, making him not want to 'shh.' In fact it makes him want to call for help, as a paw is placed over his mouth. The tom freezes, eyes wide, as the scent of fear emitting from his own body washes over him.

"Walk forward," a different voice says, "close your eyes and walk forward." Sagekit does so instantly, shuddering as he shakily puts his paws, one at a time, in front of the other.

"Open."

Sagekit opens his eyes to a whole new world. A new world grayer than Thunderclan camp. A brownish red she-kit stands in front of him, blue eyes gleaming with anger.

"What did you see?" the kit questions angrily, tail lashing. Sagekit stares stupidly. Through the crack, she means? About her? Maybe

he should ask.

"I don't know... I saw your camp?" Is this her camp? It's so bleak and sad.

"Good," the kit wrinkles her nose, "Tansykit, Lilykit, here now."

Two more kits shuffle into view. One is a tom, a handsome black bengal cat. His eyes bore into Sagekit's, hateful and serious. They are a dull green. This must be Tansykit. He has big ears and short stubby fur. "You're Thunderclan." His voice resembles his appearance. Deep and grim.

Lilykit looks much more chipper. An almost-wilted purple flower hangs loosely from behind her pricked ears. Her pelt shines orange, white, and black, a beautiful splash of each. Her face isn't one of hatred, but one of curiosity, like Sagekit is some new creature. Her mouth is frowning, but in a thoughtful, not quite sad, way. Her tail flicks back and forth silently. "No dip, Tansykit."

The reddish brown cat is clearly the ring leader, looking much older. In reality, Sagekit is probably their age. But they seem so much more aware, so aged. But then again, maybe you have to be in a new world. An alien planet. Is that what this place is?

"How old are you? A moon?" The kit asks, "You're tiny. And stupid." Sagekit bristles, a retort bubbling up inside of him. But somehow it is pinned there, inside of him, by the she-kit's prying gaze.

"Not a moon," Sagekit somehow squeaks, trying to buy time, "care to guess?" Tansykit shakes his head, exasperated.

"He *is* stupid," the tom sighs, tail flicking, "Look, we don't usually take hostages but-"

"And that won't change today," the unidentified she-kit hisses, "I just need to make sure he saw *nothing*."

"I didn't see-"

"I saw him look," Tansykit's voice is hate-laden and suspicious. Sagekit sighs. How can he convince them he saw nothing when he

did?

He had seen something. Nothing much. Nothing important. Well, since they are making a big deal, maybe it is. Sagekit battles with himself.

"And so what if I did?" he finally decides, trying to keep his tone neutral "What would I care?" Tansykit narrows his eyes and laughs. A kind of cackle, only more restrained and quiet.

"You're the leader's son! Do you think us dumb? How can we let you go if you know-"

"Terrified for his life, that's how," Lilykit smiles wickedly, almost evilly, and Sagekit finds himself already fearing for his life and much more.

"Let me go," Sagekit hisses, wanting desperately to duck behind some cat's leg, "I didn't see anything. Please." Begging seems useless, and his theory proves correct.

"Come on, let's move closer in," the reddish brown she says quickly, glancing around, "before some cat sees us." Lilykit nudges Sagekit to his paws, who then follows hesitantly along the stone walls. Out of reach of the stone crack. It is true. No cat will see him here.

"Okay," Lilykit nods, "explain this to the kit, will you?" Tansykit looks annoyed. The reddish brown she-cat nods. Sagekit is starting to think she's not a kit at all.

"I'm Scarletkit," she starts, "This is Windclan, ruled by Voidflicker. But really Voidflicker is ruled by Snapstar and Aloestar. You know this, correct?" Sagekit nods stiffly, pricking his ears for more information.

"Well, about us, we are seven moons old. You have to prove yourself before apprenticeship. You will be our ticket to that." Sagekit feels something in his stomach knot. That whole sentence feels sick.

"Get it? Good," Tansykit says, a smug grin slipping onto his face, "we're taking you to Voidflicker now."

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finally done with this! a day after christmas T-T

well this wasn't supposed to come this late at night, but that's okay! enjoy this chapter. it was fun to write in theory but super exhausting too. but I like how it turned out! have a good day/night everyone!
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Chapter 6-

Sagekit is going to die.

Voidflicker's glossy eye stares into Sagekit's two, and hardens like stones. "Stupid kit," he grumbles, tail flicking.

And with one small motion, he puts a paw to Sagekit's exposed throat.

He's going to kill me. I'm going to die. He's going to kill me.

From the corner of his eyes Sagekit sees Tansykit clearly enjoying this, cheeks puffed out in suppressed giggles. Lilykit looks worried, her beautiful blue eyes glimmering. Scarletkit's eyes are sad, but her mouth is firm. Sagekit catches her eyes, his pleading pair colliding with her sad pools.

The she-cat shakes her head. "He won't kill you."

As if speaking it into existence, Voidflicker removes his paw. Sagekit gasps a breath, eyes wide. "Please," he begs hopelessly, "I'm sorry I saw. I don't know how to-"

"You must be a moon old," Voidflicker chuckles, "I can't hurt you, even if I wished to. Snapstar would feed my guts to the buzzards." Sagekit breathes in relief, heart thumping.

"How can I forget?" he says quietly, "forget what I saw?" Voidflicker's eye hardens again.

"Depends. What did you see?"

Sagekit's breath hitches in his throat. He doesn't know. What did he see?

"Blood." Voidflicker narrows his eyes.

"So a murder," he decides, turning to the kits, "good job, you three. I think this earns you your 'paw names.'" Tansykit brightens, Lilykit squealing, and Scarletkit grinning. They don't even care about what they've caused? Sagekit's mouth runs dry.

"Run along now," Voidflicker flicks one ear, tail lashing, "I'll deal with this." Lilykit starts first, bursting from the tiny, dilapidated den. The others follow calmer, purring in delight. Leaving Sagekit alone with Voidflicker.

"I don't like hurting kits," Voidflicker starts, "except those like you. Those like you who are so privileged, who think they're better. Little spoiled brats. That's what you are." Sagekit itches to speak, but he guesses he isn't in the position to.

"So," the jet black tom blinks his one eye, "your father is Snapstar. How fun." Sagekit doesn't move. Voidflicker's eye glaze over.

"We grew up together," he says, tail flicking, "he was so kind... until this. I've watched him kill kits." His eye blinks, wetness glimmering.

"Well you're my bait," Voidflicker grins, "This is Windclan's time to shine. After so many cats killed...us degraded to machines...it's time." Voidflicker's deranged smile stretches across his face, and then disappears promptly.

"I hate you," Voidflicker curls his lip in distaste, "but I won't kill you. How could I be like that monster? But maybe he'll feel the grief he caused me."

Sagekit's head reels. What grief? Is this what Ivykit was talking about? Killing kits? That couldn't be right. Snapstar blesses kits.

Aloestar told Sagekit herself. Nothing made sense. Voidflicker must be crazy.

"The grief when he killed my kits," Voidflicker says, voice growing louder, "Every. Last. One." Sagekit's eyes go wide, as he shuffles to his feet.

"Did you know that?" Voidflicker snorts, "No? No one does. No one wants to believe that their perfect leader is a monster." Voidflicker pauses. "You won't ever be found."

Sagekit can't stay still any longer. He has to go.

Paws scrabbling on stone, Sagekit bolts. Adrenaline pumps through him like fuel, bursting into a surreal energy. He is only a blur, a flash of orange and white, exploding from the den.

The tiny crack in the stone wall looks so big now, so significant. Sagekit darts for it, chest heaving. It grows closer and closer yet...

A heavy paw crashes down on Sagekit, knocking his little body to the ground and soaring across the dust. His scruff is seized, and Sagekit goes limp as if Aloestar was holding him. But this isn't Aloestar.

The cat carrying him has white paws with little ginger swirls. Little pricks of claws shine in their sockets, ready. Sagekit swallows, his stomach fluttering with nerves. He's going to die.

The paws travel for a moment, before stopping. And suddenly, Sagekit is allowed to move freely again.

He scrambles to his paws, turning to the cat holding him.

It is a ginger tom, looking unamused. His mouth is a straight line, his white-ringed eyes focused on Sagekit. They cut into him, daring him to move. Sagekit does not.

"Hey kit," The tom says slowly, eyes darting around the den, "where do you belong?"

Sagekit desperately hopes that this cat will take him home. But at

the same time, had any cat reacted warmly when he'd told them where he came from? No.

"Why does every cat hate Snapstar?" Sagekit decides, asking slowly, "he's a good leader, and all. He built Thunderclan." The apprentice-sized ginger tom narrows his eyes and laughs dryly.

"I mean, he didn't. Thunderclan didn't begin with Snapstar. It began with Thunder."

This is news. Snapstar had said he built Thunderclan. Had he lied, or just misspoken?

"Thunder was a good cat, with a bad father. Gray Wing raised him, and he then shaped Thunderclan with Starclan by his side," the tom flicks his tail, "If you thought Thunderclan came another way, you must be one of Snapstar's kits." Sagekit freezes, eyes wide. The apprentice lets out another laugh.

"That right? I'm not mad, really," The tom dips his head, "I'm Foxpaw, and you?" Sagekit swallows, feeling trust for this cat slithering into him.

"Okay," Sagekit nods, "I'm Sagekit of Thunderclan. Why does every cat hate dad? I've heard about him killing kits. Is that true?" Foxpaw pauses to think, brow furrowed.

"Who told you that?" he finally asks, "You're just a kit." Sagekit pauses, before shrinking.

"Thanks for the story, but I've 'gotta go," he sighs, "Can you help me? I need to get through that crack." Foxpaw narrows his eyes.

"Okay," he says slowly, "but what do I get in turn?" Sagekit is stumped at this. Foxpaw doesn't crack a smile and say he is joking, so he really is expecting something. Hmm. What can Sagekit offer?

"Well... I'm going to tell Snapstar about you... Good word!"

"Liar." Foxpaw says simply, "you don't want your father to know you snuck around, do you? So you won't tell him a thing. What else?" Sagekit bristles, trying to rake together an idea.

"Um...uh... I dunno... when I'm an apprentice I'll catch loads of prey for you!" he says hopefully. Foxpaw shakes his head, frowning.

"I just need you to listen, come on," the tom wraps his tail around the kit, guiding him towards the wall.

The two duck their heads, and suddenly they are in a larger place. A place surrounded by stone, a cave maybe. Foxpaw sits. "Ready?" Sagekit nods stiffly, hesitant to agree.

"Okay," Foxpaw says, sighing, "When I was a kit, still suckling and all, Windclan owned the moors. We-"

Sagekit is horrible at listening to stories. Smoothkit has told him so many times. He's too excited, too eager, and too curious. This time is no different. "How long was that ago?" Foxpaw looks annoyed but answers nonetheless.

"Fourteen moons."

"And you're still an apprentice?"

"I'm getting to that!" Foxpaw snaps. His fur bristles and then settles, before he continues.

"But we were struggling. Not enough food, the constant battles, it was too much. The first time I set foot out of the nursery was also the first time I saw Thunderclan warriors," Foxpaw settles fully now, eyes focused solely on the kit in front of him, "They took the queens and kits, the fast ones who couldn't fight. We lived well for moons, before our camp was made..."

Foxpaw's eyes glimmer with regret, his tail flicking. "Snapstar ordered us into this small place, asking us to build to earn our keep. He murdered the ones who wouldn't come. The whole of Windclan was shipped here, so we improved it how we could.

"Some warriors banded together to escape...and so did my mother. They were slaughtered, and I, an apprentice of the 'wicked cats' is kept as an apprentice." Sagekit's heart throbs for the orange tom, so much that he stays quiet despite his bubbling questions.

"So, do you see? Do you see why the cats from here would hate your father so much?" Foxpaw asks quietly. Sagekit freezes. Is he supposed to? He does, he really does, but does he believe any of this?

Even if he wants to believe in his father, Sagekit needs to get out of Windclan, and fast. No time for talking. The tom nods.

"Okay then," Foxpaw exhales, "let's go."

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"Foxpaw!"

A familiar voice rings out as Foxpaw and Sagekit slither out of the cave and into the wider den. Red-tinted brown fur shimmers in front of the two. They both freeze.

"Foxpaw," Scarletkit frowns, eyes narrowed, "what are you..." Foxpaw shields Sagekit with his body, hissing softly.

"Help us or leave," the ginger tom says coldly, "You brought him here, didn't you? Are you trying to get him killed?" Scarletkit's cheeks flush red, and she eyes her paws.

"No..." she says roughly, "I just...I wanted my apprentice name. Scarletpaw." Foxpaw rolls his large eyes.

"You heard me," he repeats. Scarletkit seemingly shrinks.

"Fine. I'll help you," the she-cat's eyes raise from her paws to Foxpaw's eyes. Foxpaw nods quickly.

"Very well."

"You take care of Sagekit," the ginger and white tom explains hurriedly, "I'll talk to Voidflicker. Stick to the walls-" Scarletkit rolls her eyes.

"I know, I know. I *was* born here after all. Unlike some-" Foxpaw growls softly.
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"Shut it and get to work." Scarletkit snickers.

"Sir yes sir."

Sagekit's want to walk is quickly disregarded as Foxpaw sprints out of the den and into the small camp. His scruff is grabbed and he goes limp.

Scarletkit is surprisingly good at this. Her body slithers low to the ground, her head darting towards any sounds. Traveling along the walls, they are unnoticeable in the cramped space.

Sagekit is promptly dropped in front of the slice in stone, Scarletkit's piercing blue eyes staring at the orange tom. "Go. Now."

Sagekit does, scrambling through the cramped crack. He looks back, eyes shining with gratitude.

The last thing he sees from Windclan camp is a nudging reddish brown paw.

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I published this a bit ago but hated it, so I changed it! this is soooo much better!!! sagekit has been a kit for a while, and this is all i've been able to milk out of his crazy kit-hood. so expect his ceremony next chapter, which will probably come out next year ;)

happy new years eve y'all!! have a good day/night!!
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Chapter 7

It's time.

Sagekit knows he should be happy, he should, but as he sits next to Flickerkit and Smoothkit, his stomach buzzes with a sad and angry feeling. How could the three siblings be so desperate for this feeling that they'd possibly let a kit die? How could some cat wait so long to be a warrior? Sagekit is too confused to enjoy this ceremony.

"Sagekit, please step forward," Aloestar's voice rises above the buzz and praise of the crowd. *Of course I'm first! What do I do?* Sagekit obeys regardless, feeling nothing but numbness as Snapstar puffs out his chest proudly.

"Sagekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Sagepaw. Your mentor will be me, Snapstar of Thunderclan."

Sagekit numbly stumbles forward, trying to at least look as if this was his greatest dream, while the clan explodes. Snapstar gracefully leaps down from the high stone ledge, grinning as he touches his nose to Sagekit's.

Sagekit wants to recoil as fast as possible, but he stays until the cheers die down. And then he scampers away, smiling nervously.

Flickerkit, now named Flickerpaw, is assigned to Cracklight, Snapstar's brother. Smoothpaw is declared to be Aloestar's apprentice. The clan is practically erupting, spewing lava from their mouths. Sagekit sits with his forced grin while Flickerpaw and

Smoothpaw press against him and giggle.

"You both got rulers as your mentors," Flickerpaw huffs, tail flicking, "I got a cat nobody even knows exists!" Smoothpaw snickers.

"Well *I* got a cat *everyone* knows exists," the she-cat puffs out her chest in pride, grinning toothily, "so sucks for you." Flickerpaw rolls his eyes.

Sagepaw should add to the conversation, but he simply has nothing to say. Instead he hoarsely laughs. Smoothpaw casts him an unsure glance.

"So," she starts, addressing Sagepaw, "you sure got the best mentor any kit could wish for. What's it like?" Sagepaw blinks, shaking his head once.

"Um, it's normal, you know? It *was* a normal ceremony, wasn't it?" Smoothpaw's eyes roll once more.

"Okay but Snapstar's decided you'll be his apprentice since he first saw you. How's that been?" she asks, her voice actually curious. Sagepaw racks his brain for any answer but 'bad.' Because it wasn't bad for moons. It was good, rewarding, cool.

"I mean... it was nice. You know, always going someplace new," Sagepaw cracks a smile, "but I'd better not brag." Flickerpaw hits him with his tail, smiling playfully. Sagepaw snorts. "But what have you guys been up to? It's been hard to see you lately."

Flickerpaw likes this question, clearly. He shoots into a rant about playing, making friends, and watching Smoothpaw learn how to not be so impolite. Smoothpaw glowers at this. Sagepaw smiles and nods along.

"...her face was so-" Flickerpaw is quickly cut off by Snapstar's booming voice.

"Sagepaw, come on." his green eyes shine with the question. Sagepaw stares into his paws, unable to look up.

"Um...sure."

"Good, get a move on."

Without even a wave of his tail to Flickerpaw or Smoothpaw, Snapstar stalks off. Sagepaw turns to his littermates, smiling softly. "Sorry for...that. I'll catch up with you guys later?"

"Uh...sure...yeah!" Flickerpaw nods, sounding a tad nervous to speak around Snapstar. Smoothpaw just nods to her brother, turning hastily back to Flickerpaw to continue their chat. Sagepaw scrambles after his new mentor.

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The territory is beyond beautiful. Territory is an understatement, in fact. Snapstar shows him most of their 'territory,' though explaining the land beyond could be theirs too, if they so pleased.

The leaves drift carefully from the treetops, green fading yellow and brownish. The soft breeze is cool, but the weather is warm. Sagepaw's eyes widen at the sight, and all of his guilt disappears as he shoots off questions. Snapstar answers them quickly and dryly, though his amusement is noticeable.

"-and here," the older cat starts off hurriedly, "Is the border with Windclan. Or it used to be. This is where Windclan is permitted to hunt, anyways." Sagepaw tilts his head in confusion.

"Aloestar said-"

"Yes, yes, in the old forest territories," Snapstar flicks his thin orange tail with disdain, "we did not share borders with Windclan. In the lake territory we did. Now, in my kit days, I remember..." The tom looks distant, before his tail curls around Sagepaw. "It doesn't matter now. What does matter is Thunderclan's borders are boundless. Look here."

Snapstar smiles grandly, raising his large one white paw with a purr. His large fore-paw lands directly over the faint line of Windclan scent with a thud.
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Sagepaw's eyes widen as Snapstar trots briskly over the border and looks back at his apprentice. "Join me, son."

Sagepaw doesn't want to move from his spot, which he now realizes is encrusted with Thunderclan's comforting aroma of trees and moss. Why would Snapstar want him to lose it?

"Come on, most apprentices don't get to go through *two* territories on their first outing," Snapstar says impatiently, beckoning the short tom with a paw, "you should be excited."

Sagepaw nods mutely, shuffling closer to the line of scent. It seems like a barrier, towering over the two. Is he just supposed to jump it? Like it isn't there? Sagepaw turns to anxiously lick his shoulder fur down, slicking it to his skin. Snapstar offers only an impatient frown.

Sagepaw cautiously picks one paw off the array of sticks and moss and puts it over the border. His head leans so slightly over, and his twitching nose gathers the disgusting scent of Windclan wet-markings. Instantly the apprentice recoils.

"Can't I just..." Sagepaw trails off under Snapstar's rough glare.

"Come. *On.*"

Sagepaw quickly exhales through his nose, before shooting past the border. His paws churn the land beneath him as he bolts right through the revolting scents and settles to cower behind his father. Snapstar smiles, stepping over the scrunched up apprentice.

"Good job. Now stand tall. This is Thunderclan's, officially settled a moon ago. Isn't it great?"

The thing that's hard to admit is: yes, once Sagepaw has gotten through the long streak of disgust, it *is* beautiful.

For a bit, the forest stretches across the border, spruce trees huge and towering with dark brown bark flaking off. The oaks are nothing Sagepaw has never seen before, thick and bright with green leaves differentiating from the other dying and dead leaves hanging barely from the trees. Heather shoots from the ground, flaunting

their pink and purple petals in the wind. Sagepaw nods a little, eyeing the shrubs tucked into the soil.

"Why isn't..." the orange and white apprentice takes a moment to gather his confidence, "Why doesn't Windclan use their territory anymore...? Aloestar said there used to be a camp-"

"Well, easy," Snapstar interrupts quickly, swooping in to stop Sagepaw from talking anymore, "they chose to join our nation. Windclan was suffering. Come along, I'll show you."

Without warning, Snapstar shoots past the heather and other undergrowth and towards the middle of the territory. Sagepaw scrambles to follow, tripping over his paws as he tries to keep up.

They sprint for what feels like mere seconds, but it must be more than that, as the lush scenery thins out into a barren moor. It seems this land has been abandoned, and not only by Windclan. By everything, every plant, every animal, every cloud. Now it is only yellowish cracking dirt.

Snapstar veers, ducking underneath a fallen tree, before his tail disappears into someplace underground. Sagepaw pauses, heart in his throat. This must be Windclan camp.

The apprentice ducks his head and crawls into the narrow tunnel.

The air here smells faintly of cats and gorse bushes. It is a faraway scent, one that will eventually be washed away by wind or rain. The dirt here too is different. Broken into a fine powder, like it was walked on by many sets of paws. Sagepaw feels uncomfortable, stepping over the tiny mound, but it seems to stretch on.

Snapstar turns with a flick of his tail, his eyes darkening. "Come closer. Look." Sagepaw obeys hesitantly, walking a pace forward and lifting his head. His eyes widen in shock.

The dens look as if crushed by a giant paw, sagging and crumbled like a well-loved moss ball. The little dip in land, a shallow depression residing under Snapstar's paws, held only rotting pieces of prey that looked thoroughly mangled, like they'd had trouble

killing the poor creatures.

"Like what you see?" Snapstar asks, voice dripping with sarcasm, eyes stern, "is it better than our home. I know you haven't seen Windclan camp, but I'll get that arranged soon."

Sagepaw nods numbly, feeling out of place. He doesn't want to face Voidflicker. Or any other cat. Just the thought of Tansykit's large, muscled, form makes him shudder.

However, more importantly, someone had lied.

And who had a reason to?

Chapter 8-

The sun slips beneath the thick carpets of the reddened sky. The air whistles with a promise of rain, no, a thunderstorm. Sagepaw flattens his ears against the screeching gusts.

"It's so beautiful!" Smoothpaw purrs, leaning against Flickerpaw heavily. Sagepaw's eyes flicker to the two, taking in the image. His heart feels heavy. Why can't he be a part of this?

"It's turning Flickerpaw reddish," Sagepaw tries to pitch in, though he is largely ignored. Why won't they listen to him?

"Hey, Sagepaw, c'mere real quick!" a tom's squeaky yet serious voice chirps. Sagepaw jumps at the opportunity. Finally, some cat asking for him, instead of him inserting himself into all conversations. Good.

Sagepaw waves his tail absent-mindedly to his siblings, trotting off towards the voice.

The tom is a yellow color, fur shining in the evening sun. His eyes, shimmering with nervousness, flash upward, and so does his mouth. It's a restrained, unsure, smile, so much it looks nearly forced. Sagepaw narrows his eyes. Snapstar had said to always be cautious of smiling faces. Especially ones that called him.

"Hi, uh, Sagepaw! Can we talk, please," the tom dips his head, voice lowering, "in private?" Sagepaw nearly snickers, feeling a nervous chuckle coming on. What's happening?

"I'd talk to Flickerpaw because..." the tom clears his throat, "um... so there are rumors... that you're not too friendly. I mean not by me! I'm sure-"

"Who are you?" Sagepaw pushes the uncertainty from his voice, trying to sound brave. But it's really hard, especially when this tom was probably moons older than him, even if small.

"Yewpaw," the tom answers instantly, "eight moons." Sagepaw nods.

"Okay, where should we talk?"

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Sagepaw dips under the overhang, fur bristling in suspicion. "So, what'd you wish to say?" Yewpaw's small, nervous, smile appears again.

"So, uh, I've been training for a while and I'm top apprentice! Better than a lot of cats. Was complimented by Snapstar himself, just so you know-"

"Yeah," Sagepaw flicks his tail impatiently, puffing out his chest. This cat is older than him, and Sagepaw still gets to boss him around, like a warrior! *Like Snapstar.*

"Yeah, uh, sorry. Um so, don't be mad but...about your sister..." The tom's eyes flash with embarrassment, his cheeks reddening. The nervous smile dissipates.

Sagepaw can guess now, his fur rippling in surprise. His mouth opens and then shuts, before breaking into a grin of amusement. His whiskers twitch in the breeze, a chuckle morphing into a whole-hearted gaggle of giggles.

"You *like* her? *My* sister? Starclan, my dad would rip you... Stick to liking Fallowpaw!" Sagepaw snickers, his voice bubbling up and down with laughs, "I mean, she like, totally doesn't know you exist!" Yewpaw's ears flatten.

"I mean, yeah, but... can't you put in a good word for me? 'Cause she's, you know, your sister. Who else would she want to be mates
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with?" Sagepaw laughs into the night sky.

"Someone she knows the name of!"

"Well, she *does* know my name-"

"Uh-huh, totally."

Yewpaw shrinks ten times smaller, sighing deeply. His tail curls around himself in sadness. Sagepaw looks at the shrunken ball, feeling a slight pity for the tom.

"Fine, I'll tell her for you. That's all though." Life returns to Yewpaw's yellow form. His green eyes shine brightly in the under the dark overhang.

"Really? Thanks!"

Small orange paws scurry across stone, disappearing into the dark of Thunderclan camp. Sagepaw narrows his eyes and sighs. Tomorrow is going to be a long day.

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The blanket of void wraps tightly around the camp, stilling it with its careful hands. Sagepaw blinks at the pure blackness, eyes narrowing through the haze.

There is nothing special about the apprentice den. Heather and a few flowers line the outside, decorating the interior and exterior equally. The nests are warm and thick, like always. Some are accessorized with flowers and vines, mostly by over-decorative she-cats like Fallowpaw and Smoothpaw.

Sagepaw snuggles into his spongy nest, purring rhythmically as comfort washes over him like a wave. Smoothpaw's tongue rasps over Flickerpaw's head, and Flickerpaw's over Sagepaw's. The orange and white tom returns the favor, licking Smoothpaw's leaf-matted pelt clean.

Yewpaw's eyes linger on the triplets, mostly Sagepaw, as if urging
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him to do it now. Sagepaw ignores his promise, continuing to lick his littermates in silence.

The den feels stuffier, hotter, under Yewpaw's glare. Is it a glare? Sagepaw sneaks a glance at the tom. It better not be.

"Smoothpaw," Sagepaw's legs move without permission as he stands, tail beckoning sister, "I have to say something. Flickerpaw can come if he wants." Inside Sagepaw wishes Flickerpaw doesn't stand up, but he does, eyes shining with curiosity. Curious badger. Sagepaw sighs in frustration.

The three slip into the night, ducking their heads and trotting into the cool air. The breezes whistles past them once more, rain patting down evenly.

"Starclan, it sucks out here," Smoothpaw waves mud off her paws. Thunder breaks the sky.

"Yeah," Sagepaw swallows his unease and annoyance, "yeah." Smoothpaw narrows her eyes in suspicion.

"Okay, tell me now. I'm interested." Flickerpaw nods profusely.

Sagepaw sighs. "Yewpaw likes you."

Flickerpaw throws a cackle into the sky, his breath all but taken by laughter. Smoothpaw's eyes boggle out of her head, serious yet amused. "Yewpaw *like likes* me?" Sagepaw can't hold back a snort.

"Yep, totally smitten."

"Isn't he like, twelve moons old?"

"Eight," Flickerpaw pipes, "he's cool, real cool. Ate rotten prey on a dare." The tom's fluffy white tail curls in amusement. Smoothpaw gags.

"I do *not* like him. Can you tell him that, please?" the she-cat turns her eyes on Sagepaw again, this time pleadingly.

"Nope, no way. I could never do that to another tom. Flickerpaw's

turn," the tabby orange and white tom says assertively. Flickerpaw sighs heavily.

"Fine, give me a sec."

The tom slips back into the den, a little stone cave, his eyes unsure and pitying. Sagepaw sighs, leaning into Smoothpaw.

"How do you think he'll act?" Smoothpaw breaks the silence with the unsure inquiry. Sagepaw shrugs simply.

"I dunno. I barely spoke to the tom."

"I talk to him... a bit, I suppose."

Sagepaw quickly turns on her, eyes not able to keep the accusatory undertones out of it. Smoothpaw rolls her eyes in return.

"Nothing weird, you mouse-brain. Just casual talk, you know? He *is* top apprentice." Sagepaw's fur bounces back down, and so does his suspicion level. And even if the she-cat did like Yewpaw, what is he supposed to do? That'd be a problem for Aloestar.

Sagepaw and Smoothpaw yawn in sync, Smoothpaw rising with a stretch. "I'm sleeping out here tonight. No way I'm going back into that den." Sagepaw shrugs.

"Okay."

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Sagepaw lightly strikes Flickerpaw on the nose, causing him to recoil just long enough for him to pounce onto the furry white tom. Flickerpaw mimics prey, going limp when Sagepaw sinks his teeth into his scruff.

"Quit," Cracklight calls, "Get up, Flickerpaw."

Sagepaw climbs to his paws, helping his brother up. Flickerpaw shakes his pelt, offering a half-hearted smile. "Good job." Sagepaw nods stiffly, looking to Snapstar for his praise. The tom dips his head.
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"How many times do I tell you," Cracklight sighs in frustration, "recover quicker! And fix that form. You look like a dead squirrel!" Flickerpaw lowers his head at the criticism. Cracklight continues. "Well, Snapstar, Sagepaw didn't look *that* good. I saw his clumsy missed hits. You 'ain't 'gonna say that though, are you?" Snapstar snickers.

"Look at your apprentice-"

"Look at your son," Cracklight retorts quickly, tail flicking, "If you won't tell him, I will." The tom turns to an annoyed Sagepaw.

"Your form is awful. In a real battle, your claws need to be sunk into the dirt. Your tail is too low; you'll be thrown over with a gust of wind. Your hits are clumsy and uncoordinated, missing almost every time. At least you can get off the ground," Cracklight pauses to glare at Flickerpaw, "but leaving your stomach exposed is unacceptable. You can't win with brute strength-"

"Who said?" Snapstar interrupts, eyes challenging. Sagepaw expects a retort quickly, but moments pass by with a thick, syrupy, silence, spreading over them. Flickerpaw looks frankly destroyed for those seconds, his eyes downcast and his tail dusting the dry ground.

"Fine," Cracklight growls, "Fight me." Snapstar turns his head sharply. *Good thing they're brothers,* Sagepaw thinks*, Cracklight would be ripped apart by now.*

Sagepaw quickly takes the statement back. Perhaps he will be ripped apart in the next few seconds. It's hard to tell.

"Fight?" Snapstar's mouth curls into a smile, a cruel smile almost, "Okay? But you're going to get hurt? Do you want to do this again?" Cracklight instantly deflates.

"Keep training your Starclan forsaken apprentice," he spits, "and I'll train my *humble* one." Snapstar snarls.

"You do that."

Cracklight spins around, eyes narrowed in a glare directed at Sagepaw. He shrinks quickly under the authorities' eyes. He can't

face such hateful eyes. Instead he looks to his brother, faking a smirk.

"Those two are like a pack of foxes-" Flickerpaw silences him with a simple glare.

"Stop it, Sagepaw. I don't want to hear it. How can you even find this funny?" the white tom pauses to take a sighing breath, "Oh wait, I forgot. You get the praise. Always. What do I get? Nothing. Shut *up* for once."

Sagepaw freezes, feeling a sharp dagger pierce his heart. Flickerpaw stares coldly at his brother, no single strand of affection in them. And then he walks, no, ambles, away, his tail low and a growl forming in his throat. Snapstar has already started to leave too, and Flickerpaw follows Cracklight.

"You're just jealous!" Sagepaw calls feebly, "I am better, you know. Just, uh, shut up!" But he already has, and the silence feels heavy. Sagepaw can't bring himself to follow Snapstar, not after everything. How could Flickerpaw say that?

Sagepaw flicks his tail. Whatever. Stupid brother. He is just jealous, after all. He can't hunt, can't fight. Can't do anything right at all, even anything decent. Sagepaw feels lively knowing he's better at virtually everything.

The tom pads forward, shooting smug glances at his brother's back. Flickerpaw doesn't twitch his tail, or even look backward. Sagepaw deflates once more, before padding quietly after his mentor.

And quickly, the question presents itself, worming into Sagepaw's head. Should he keep padding after his mentor, or veer towards Flickerpaw to apologize. The question builds into a whole thought, nagging at his head.

Mentor or brother? Snapstar or Flickerpaw?

Sagepaw looks over his shoulder, frowning as Flickerpaw hastily trots away. And then he turns his head and continues to walk after his mentor.

He chooses none of them. Not mentor nor brother.

Father.

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i'm actually gaining confidence now on this story!!! so yeah, i'm not afraid to admit the way this chapter ended was AMAZING!!!

thank's for reading everyone!!
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Chapter 9-

"Strike harder, right here," Snapstar eyes Sagepaw fiercely, pointing to his mid-back with his tail-tip. Sagepaw growls through his teeth, fur burning with a harsh heat.

"Why, if you're just going to embarrass me?" The tom sits with a stubbornness a kit could not match. His tail flicks. Snapstar narrows his eyes.

"Fine then, come on. I'll get some real practice into you."

What's that supposed to mean? Sagepaw follows hesitantly, his anger fizzling out quickly. His fur bristles wildly. Is that a threat?

The silence of the forest is comforting yet terrifying. The subtle crunch of leaves and the whoosh of the breeze tickles Sagepaw's eardrums. Why is it so silent?

A cloud of sound explodes from somewhere in the densely packed forest, loud and demanding attention. Snapstar turns his head, a smirk painting his once-serious features. "Come on. It's only a border battle. Those dumb Windclan cats don't like their border situation, clearly."

Sagepaw freezes as the smell of blood trickles into his nostrils in a steady stream. And anger. And fear. Snapstar smiles wider. "You're plenty trained enough. Don't be afraid, trust yourself." Sagepaw is still frozen up, because he knows this place.

The sound of his leg cracking fills his ears, and he's back, back in that fever dream. His leg cracks about a million times and the sound is deafening. *Crack. Crack. Crack.*

Sagepaw feels blood under his paws, his claws covered in the syrupy red liquid. Like when he died. Did he die? The battlefield is

in front of him, but it can't be real. How is he so tall? But it must be real, because it's the same place, only darker, dead. Sagepaw can't move, and the battle swarms around him.

And then he's back, with Snapstar by his side. The battle dissipates into the ground, only existing in the awful sounds. Sagepaw blinks, feeling sick.

"Ready?" Snapstar asks, his voice filled with a twisted kind of excitement, "3...2...1!" The muscled tom propels forward swiftly, darting into the trees. Sagepaw has no choice. His paws move, tracing the steps his mentor had previously just taken.

The battle is bigger than Sagepaw had imagined. Yewpaw and Fallowpaw fight side by side, their lips curled as they take on an opponent much bigger than themselves. Minnowrose is nearby, shooting nervous glances at the apprentices. Sagepaw wonders for a second how such an old she-cat could still fight, but it is clear she's more than capable, even with her muzzle graying.

Snapstar dives into the battle, sinking his teeth into a smaller, thinner cat. The little feline kicks off, effectively winding the leader long enough to slip away, bleeding. Sagepaw is confused, eyes darting around, but there are too many cats, so many he doesn't recognize. What if he bites the wrong cat? Hurts some cat badly? What if-

A heavy force knocks into him, toppling the tom over. His head hits stone as his whole body rolls towards the cliff, but, instinctively, his claws slide out to stop himself from careening over the bluff.

"It's you again," a familiar voice whispers in his ears, dampening them, "Stupid kit. What was that name?" The feeling of claws penetrating fur sinks into Sagepaw. But that doesn't concern him. It's the cliff, about a fox tail away, that sends his mind into flight or fight.

And what choice does he have?

This cat, Tansykit, could push him. Probably will, judging by the tone of his voice. And Sagepaw can't die. Not yet. He isn't willing to

go through death again. So instead, Sagepaw turns to the older tom with a snarl.

"Are you really going to kill me? The leader's son?"

He must look so small now, kit-fur still clinging to him in clumps, his little form flattened. His snarl must look like a kit sneeze, as bad as it sounded. Tansykit laughs again, kicking Sagepaw, causing the tom to wince.

"Sure, why not? After what he's don-"

"He didn't do anything! Your territory was destroyed; there was nothing living there! We saved you, don't you see? You dumb tom and your dumb clan!" Sagepaw can't help it, it seems obvious. Why lie when the truth is waiting just a little further beyond?

Sagepaw's eyes harden, feeling rage bubble inside of him. In one swift moment, just like he'd been trained to do, he kicked out, striking the tom's abdomen. Tansykit skips a scream, a gasp, before he tumbles over Sagepaw.

The battle rages still as time drags on. Though the winces, yowls, screams, and snarls fill the air, it is silent for Sagepaw. It is just him and air, the place where Tansykit's claws had dug into stinging almost as a reminder. Sagepaw rolls onto his paws, stumbling forward. Tansykit should be sprawled on the stone, gasping for air and writhing in pain.

But he isn't.

Sagepaw knows, he does, but he refuses to believe it, and refuses to realize what he's done. *He's run off, that coward.*

Sagepaw stumbles forward to the edge of the rocky cliff and looks down, down, down, down, onto the rock-encrusted soil below. A bit of brown lies below, convulsing. Red streams from the tom's open mouth. Sagepaw freezes, eyes wide in horror. Time slows, and the apprentice collapses into a ball, tears streaming.

no

no

nononononono.

No

Sagepaw feels an agony, different from pain, different from grief. It is worse than death. A different kind of grief that consumes him, eats him, and it's too jumbled and too loud and why hasn't the battle stopped and-

"Tansypaw!" A blood-curdling scream escapes, but it doesn't explode from Sagepaw, no, it's from another voice, "What did you do?" Sagepaw is shaken with a brown paw as the voice screeches in his ear. ***"What did you do?"***

What did he do?

Scarletpaw's voice reaches his mind, repeating over and over. *What did you do? What did you do? Whatdidyoudo?*

"He fell," Sagepaw manages to choke out the lie, before curling into a ball again and feeling nothing but guilt. His heart beat sounds like the crack of his legs against brown fur.

Sagepaw is ignored after that. The battle is gone, all of the cats now focused on Tansykit. No, Tansypaw. At least he got his apprentice name he yearned for so many days ago. Sagepaw wants to be ignored, not acknowledged. And he gets what he gets.

"Come on," a voice Sagepaw doesn't care to name says softly.

"He's in shock," another voice pipes up.

"I'm fine," Sagepaw manages to mumble. But he isn't, he's so far from that. He can't even bring himself to walk when Flickerpaw comes to help haul him to his paws. Smoothpaw licks his head, licks his tear-stained chin.

"It's not your fault," she whispers softly, licking the salty liquid from his cheeks. If only she knew.

Sagepaw stumbles back into the trees while Windclan walks somewhere. They yell, something about re-building their camp, but Sagepaw just hopes they can get away from here. Why want to stay connected to a camp that holds the cats you'd previously fought with?

Sagepaw barely notices anything after this. Not the motion of his paws moving, not the change from woods to spongy moor and then back again, not Flickerpaw saying he's sorry for leaving Sagepaw in the battle.

The only true thing he notices is the beat of his heart, tainted by the sound of Tansypaw flying into the air.

Chapter 10-

What does happiness feel like?

Bubbly, like light, a weight lifted off weakened shoulders. Like being a kit again, like the moment your teeth sink into prey.

What is the difference between death and life?

The only difference is you're blocked off from your loved ones, trapped in a loop of pain and hazy confusion. But is life much better?

What is the purpose of pain?

To warn that something is wrong with you, that you need to fix yourself.

What happens if you can't ease that pain?

It keeps stabbing and jolting and stabbing and squeezing life out of you until there is none left. All you want to do is sleep, to distract your mind. But then even dreams turn into nightmares.

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Sagepaw blinks his eyes open, the pattering of rain breaking the shield that is sleep. A roar comes from thunder, and it sounds like pain and anguish. It sounds like how Sagepaw feels.

A soft pelt brushes his, and Smoothpaw's head raises, her glassy blue eyes softening at the sight of her brother. They instantly blink awake, her body rising from the nest.

"Do you need prey? Or a walk? I have training today but... you could come and watch. Sun could help," Smoothpaw licks the area
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between Sagepaw's ears affectionately. Sagepaw shuffles away.

His stomach feels like it's eating itself. The gnawing of hunger pierces it, stabbing over and over. But Sagepaw doesn't mind the pain. It distracts him from the pain tainting his mind, so they work together well.

"No," Sagepaw shakes his head, "not hungry. I'd watch you train though. Sh-Sure." Smoothpaw's eyes brighten with hope, which only makes the guilt stronger. Sagepaw knows his will, or more like lack-of, to get out of his nest bothers her and Flickerpaw, who'd long given up on getting him to take a walk. But sun could help. It could. Perhaps Snapstar wouldn't be so disappointed.

Sagepaw struggles to his paws, his matted pelt seemingly fused to the moss. Smoothpaw helps him up, grunting dramatically. Sagepaw sits on the stone, the cool, smooth, surface, feeling good on his tangled pelt.

"Sure you don't want prey?" Smoothpaw narrows her eyes almost suspiciously, "I don't remember when you last ate-"

"I'm fine."

"Okay, okay."

Sagepaw only takes a few moments to lazily groom the chunks of moss from his pelt, leaving the mats and tangles for later. His paws, heavy with an invisible weight, move to follow Smoothpaw's pristine and shining orange pelt.

The camp seems new and dangerous. The last time Sagepaw has been here was after Flickerpaw and Smoothpaw hauled him into the medicine cat den for poppy seeds, and then into his den a day later. The sun is too bright, the laughs too loud. Sagepaw doesn't want to see happy cats right now.

Just like the day with the cliff, the sadness-free title Sagepaw had given it, life moves too quickly. Flickerpaw grins when Sagepaw locks eyes with him. Cracklight offers a gruff 'hi.' Aloestar nuzzles her son, wrapping her tail around his back and guiding him to the

prey pile.

Sagepaw can't see quite right, feeling intoxicated by the scent of blood, even if just squirrel blood. Aloestar asks which piece of prey he'd like. What piece of prey? None.

But instead he points out the brown squirrel with blood pooling from the mouth.

Sagepaw chokes down his prey, not noticing the usually sweet and chewy taste. Right now all he can notice is the smell of blood on his paws.

The distraction is gone now. Now he has to face the grief instead of ignoring it for a greater, more important, pain. Sagepaw hates this more than anything.

Sagepaw follows his siblings and their mentors, swearing the snap of sticks and crunch of leaves sound the like the crunch of a cat's head on spiked stone. Huh. Does anyone else think that? Whatever. Sagepaw needs to focus on not being left behind. Needs to look happy, if not for himself, for his siblings. Maybe then, if he does something good, the world will take pity on him. But then again, time doesn't accommodate the lost.

The Sandy Hollow approaches, or, more formally, the Training Hollow. The hollow, the original hollow, was left behind many, many, moons ago. But a new one, not quite hollow shaped enough, was dug-out. Though wonky and far from perfect, it worked. And shockingly, it still does, though weathered.

Smoothpaw and Flickerpaw jump in first, their tails twitching with excitement. Their mentors, much less enthusiastic, follow. Sagepaw holds back, trying to etch a smile into his face. But what should it look like? Excited, relieved, happy, pleased? Right now all it looks like is fake.

Training starts with a monologue about teamwork. How they all must fight in pairs. How fighting alone is dangerous and foolish. Cracklight says this all shooting glances at Sagepaw. He rolls his eyes.

"Okay," Aloestar takes over, "before we learn all about teamwork, lets warm up. Something fun. Let's spar." Surprisingly, Cracklight nods.

Flickerpaw and Smoothpaw line up opposite each other, tails lashing excitedly. Sagepaw tries to add a spark of thrill to his eyes, but it doesn't quite work, not like how his siblings work.

"3...2...1... Go!" Aloestar calls into the air. And with sly smiles, the apprentices leaps forward. Smoothpaw is quick, Flickerpaw slower and clumsier. Smoothpaw barrels into her brother, teeth snapping and claws snuggled into their sheathes. Flickerpaw aims a hit, not quite clumsy but definitely not perfect, at her muzzle. Smoothpaw ducks, but such a severe movement sends her sprawling. Flickerpaw grins, but that fleeting second is all Smoothpaw needs to kick out her hind paws and-

Sagepaw can't watch anymore. He turns and prances into the forest.

His stomach bile burns his throats, trying to escape. The squirrel from earlier must be there too. Is it trying to claw its way out, like Tansypaw struggling to get back onto the cliff that is Sagepaw's brain? Sagepaw gags, trying not to vomit up all of the memories of the day with the cliff.

"It's not your fault."

But it is. It was his hind paws that sprung the tom into certain death. Down, down, down, so many fox tails down, into a sea of his own blood. Maybe if there was just another way, just a hit to the nose would've worked. Why, why, why...

"Where'd Sagepaw run off to?"

Cracklight's grumpy voice cuts through the shelter of the hazy rain. Oh no. Sagepaw doesn't want to be seen, not ever. He should disappear. They'll find out eventually, so why be around when they do?

Sagepaw drags his paws, eyes squinting through the rain, deeper into the forest. The trees all look the same, and it's so comforting. If

only life is like that.

"Sagepaw!" Smoothpaw's voice sounds almost urgent, and the tom imagines her slipping in the mud as kits, as he is thrown into a more pleasant memory. A memory of fun, of laughter and play.

"Sagepaw!"

The voice holds no laughter. Sagepaw slips further into the woods, everything darkened by rain. Thunder comes down stronger.

"Don't play this kit-game, Sagepaw!" Cracklight's somewhat concerned voice cuts through another rumble of thunder and then a clap of lightning. Sagepaw doesn't take notice. Wherever he's going, it'll have mud.

Sagepaw stumbles forward, turning where his paws tell him too. He hears the voices far off, slipping further to the left, the wrong direction. The heavy wind and rain blasts his scent this way and that, no real trail left of it. Good. Sagepaw spots a huge pile of brown pooled on the ground like blood. The tom smiles slightly, if only to please his mind.

Slowly and sparingly, Sagepaw lowers himself into the mud, paws slipping. Echoes of giggles from the past only make it more appealing. With a rare purr escaping from his jaws, Sagepaw falls asleep to the thrumming of his heart, the crack of Tansypaw muffled by rain.

Chapter 11-

Blood sticks stubbornly to Sagepaw's pelt, Tansypaw's blood, and It won't leave. It is Tansypaw's blood on his paws, isn't it? But it feels like so many more, compiled into one blood stain. Sagepaw looks up, eyes narrowing in the fog, and he sees the blood on his pelt, glimmering. Through the haze sits accusatory glare of the icy blue eyes.

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There is no blood on Sagepaw's fur.

It is only mud. Cool, dark, mud, perfect for the backdrop of the forest shrouded in black. Sagepaw's green eyes open, shimmering in the night. His panting seizes. It is only mud.

The aftermath of the rain is a sludgy, sloshy, mud pit. The dirt is soaked, resembling Sagepaw's scrunched-up and dripping pelt. The trees seem tall and threatening, their long branches looking like dripping dog mouths. Sagepaw has never been alone in the dark woods. There's a first time for everything.

Sagepaw stands, muddy water streaming from his pelt. His eyes narrow against the fog and he inhales. His stomach rumbles, the mild hunger back and ready to expand. The wind holds no answers. Sagepaw sighs in frustration.

The minutes of bliss ignorance, when all Sagepaw thinks about is hunger, are amazing. Until the crippling sadness returns, the mud on his pelt reminding him so much of blood Sagepaw can't focus. The scent of a wood mouse flies by him without the tom twitching an ear.
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Sagepaw furiously grooms his pelt, the dull scent of sticky water-downed mud leaving him. His scent billows into the air, but Sagepaw can't care less. As long as the blood leaves.

The orange and white tom flicks his tail, eyes swinging to survey his surroundings. He's on the border with Windclan, but the border is freshly marked this time, as if a sign of courage. Are the Windclan cats really wanting their demolished territory back? Fine then. Sagepaw slips beyond the border, head low.

"Stop!"

Sagepaw's head goes up instantly, eyes slitted against the humid fog. A silhouette of a small, long, cat stands in the haze. And then, with surprising speed, the cat sprints toward Sagepaw.

The tom doesn't move, watching the cat's feature be revealed. A black pelt, similar to the night sky, and one single green eye. Voidflicker. Sagepaw feels fear and adrenaline pump through him, his legs urging him to run.

"What are you doing-" the black tom starts, before his eye narrows in remembrance, and his crooked smile lights his face. "Sagekit. Sagepaw. You're on Windclan territory-"

Sagepaw hears only the blood in his ears as he runs, no, sprints, across the moor. His paws thrum against the ground, an energy exploding from him. He shoots into Thunderclan territory, tumbling over his paws. Sagepaw feels his panic nudging, shoving, him forward. Voidflicker chases like Sagepaw is merely a rabbit, ready to be crushed under delicate paws.

The wooded ground proves to be helpful and Sagepaw leaps and scrambles over leaves and brambles, slowing his pursuer. The branches once looking so threatening and dangerous feel helpful as their branches entangle Voidflicker for a few moments. But a second is only a second. Voidflicker doesn't give up, so Sagepaw doesn't give thanks. Not yet, anyways.

Sagepaw's chest burns by the time he veers around a hill, disappearing into his camp walls. His breath catches in his throat,

large, hiccuping, inhales. Breath. Sagepaw can't.

Voidflicker's dry laugh sounds from a bit outside of the walls. "Fine then, run from me, run back to Snapstar," he chuckles and Sagepaw looks cautiously over his shoulder. The black tom sits peacefully, his green eye shining with amusement. "After all, he isn't your father."

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Sagepaw collapses into Aloestar's pelt, his chest heaving. The sun pricks over the clouds, shining a deep orange-red. Sagepaw is home. Finally home, with Tumblecry and Aloestar.

Tumblecry tsks, tail flicking. "Why'd you leave?" she questions softly, sniffing at Sagepaw, mumbling about nothing wrong. And nothing is wrong. Physically.

Sagepaw is confused. He's sad and scared and confused and dizzy. He wants to vomit. He wants to cry. He wants to sleep with Smoothpaw licking his head and Flickerpaw curled around him. Like he's a kit again, playing moss ball in the shaded leader-den. Giggling in the mud. Unaware that the mud would soon feel like blood. Unaware that his father would morph from a father then a mentor then what? Something other than that? A stranger?

Tumblecry doesn't care about him, no, not ever. Her eyes are nothing but annoyed and maybe a little bored. Sagepaw doesn't want her to care. If she did, perhaps she'd notice the dead look in his eyes. Aloestar doesn't. No cat does.

Smoothpaw trots into the medicine cat den, Flickerpaw on her heels. Both their smiles are oddly crooked, like a smile could hurt him. But is she wrong to be cautious? Sagepaw is fragile now. At any moment he could shatter, like mere sea glass.

"You're home!" Smoothpaw falls into her brother, purring deeply, tail curling around his small form, "I knew you would! You just needed some alone time, right?" Smoothpaw never acts this bubbly and social. She must really think Sagepaw will crumble.
~~~

Well, he won't. Not today, anyway.

Sagepaw purrs too, landing a lick in between Smoothpaw's ears. Flickerpaw doesn't speak much, but relief billows off of him in clouds. Sagepaw forces his mouth to be upturned, happy. That word. That lie.

The siblings exchange smiles and licks and purrs. Sagepaw acts happy, and if glad is considered happy he definitely is. No cat asks where he's been, and he doesn't give hints. Sagepaw is only more glad about this.

Happiness, at least his, might be just an act, but such a smile and scrunched-up eyes can get Sagepaw far. Perhaps he's not a kit, a broken kit, anymore. Perhaps Snapstar will train him again. Perhaps this will impress him. Good boy, Sagepaw. Sit, Sagepaw.

Snapstar. The label father is already gone, Sagepaw knows. It's been since the very first day. When has Snapstar let Sagepaw bat at his tail? When has Snapstar brought Aloestar prey? When has Snapstar gawked about how handsome Sagepaw is? Never. When has Snapstar been a father?

But Voidflicker really puts it into focus. How could Snapstar be his father, in any sense of the word? Do looks really determine kin? But if Snapstar isn't his father, what is he? A mentor, a roll model? Only Snapstar knows.

And soon, will that knowledge be Sagepaw's?

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there's more content in my book of stuff!! a spoiler for other side too, so please check it out.

also, please don't hate me for disappearing for a few days and panicking everyone and then immediately popping back. my stuff is still not quite together, but I've seen (after I left sadly) how much this support is helping me. thank you for showing me this!! just thank y'all.

sorry to get all sappy LOL. here's the update and major plot twist!!
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any ideas on who their father is, or if Voidflicker is lying or not? those would be fun to hear!! have an amazing day and sorry for the long authors note!! happy early valentines day <3

Chapter 12-

Training is boring.

Snapstar wants to teach him how to stalk silently, but the sand makes his steps light and silent anyway. Sagepaw doesn't argue, though his thoughts command him to move faster, and request to at least practice somewhere where it'll count.

He commands them to shut up.

Sagepaw feels no happiness and Snapstar's voice sharpens with praise. "Good job! Prey won't hear a thing except their neck snapping." The image of Tansypaw flashes in his mind, neck thrown back at an odd angle and red streaming from his mouth. The tom freezes, the familiar grief hitting him like a monster speeding across the Thunderpath.

Speaking of the Thunderpath, why does it smell so sour?

Instantly, Sagepaw jolts to attention. Snapstar stretches his nose high, mouth propped open. The tom's position goes rigid, freezing like Sagepaw. The smell is thick, disgusting, and Sagepaw fights to spit it out. Smoke. So much smoke.

Snapstar jumps to his paws, looking panicked, so panicked. "Fire, fire..." he whispers, tail lashing, "Fire!"

The two run, scrambling out of the Sandy Hollow, eyes darting through the new-found haze. Snapstar nudges his son, no, not son, forward. The smoke thickens, but they run on, both knowing where they must go. Thunderclan camp.

The soil heats up as they run, the smoke getting thicker and resistant, but they don't stop. Not until a wall of orange and red heat meet them. Fire, engulfing the trees and shrubs, fed by the

sticks on the burning ground. Sagepaw's eyes widen. They are too late. Too late. Too late. How are they too late?

Snapstar pants, his eyes crazed. "My clan...My home..." Sagepaw curls his lip in disgust. How could he be so worried about a home? It's Smoothpaw and Flickerpaw Sagepaw's worried about.

"How do we-"

Sagepaw is cut off by Snapstar huffing loudly. His tail, once lashing, goes still and alert. And the Thunderclan leader runs. Not towards camp, not trying to get around the wall, not pacing. Away. Runs away. Sagepaw freezes in panic.

"Dad?" smoke fills the apprentice's mouth, "Dad?" But no outline cuts through the smoke, no cat returns. "Dad!"

Sagepaw has to do this alone. He can't sit here, feeling confused and lost, breathing in full breaths of smoke. He has to do something.

Sagepaw turns and sprints, parallel from the fire, feeling weaker with each step. Black, billowing, smoke fills the tom's throat. It hurts, each wheezing breath like fire through his nostrils and throat. But there has to be a way around. There has to be.

But there isn't.

Sagepaw circles camp, but the only thing he gets closer to is the fire. It rages, getting closer and licking his paws. Each time he veers away it feels closer, reaching out to him like paws of warmth, eating the color of everything and making them black and gray. Sagepaw feels like it's already burned him.

The tom feels all the strength leave him, his chest burning and his mouth in a world of hurt. Everything hurts. His head the most.

Brown paws land in front of Sagepaw, and blue eyes meet his.

"Come on."

A muzzle slips under his, and his body is forced to stand. Sagepaw wants to flop down in the pure heat again. "Who...Why..." His

mouth feels charred like the logs of wood. The she-cat, whose icy eyes reflect the pure opposite ice, allows Sagepaw to lean on her as he stumbles away, away, away, from the wall of fire.

"Thunderclan is in the river. Come on," she urges, picking up the pace. The fire eats up the land behind them. Sagepaw knows they are racing against the fire, against the clock, but he can't move any faster than a slow amble. But the she-cat keeps moving, even through her own wheezes and coughing, so Sagepaw does too.

Finally, the refreshing feel of cold hits Sagepaw's ankles, and wet seeps into the apprentice. Sagepaw collapses into the fresh, icy, water, breathing in foggy air. Hotness dissolves into a strange comfort and the cat next to him pants in pure exhaustion.

"Thank-"

"Thank Voidflicker."

Sagepaw is cut off by the she-cat next to him. Once so sensible, Sagepaw now looks at her as a fox-hearted mouse-brain. The tom's head swivels around, his eyes blinking rapidly. It is Scarletpaw. Sagepaw recoils from the she-cat, shock rippling through him like the icy cold of the water.

"You think I'd save you? Willingly? Voidflicker sent me to find you and your siblings. Where are they?" Scarletpaw's voice is cold and emotionless as she rises, pelt dripping. She twitches her whiskers, letting the water dribble off of the strands. "Actually, now that I think of it, why would I save them? After you pushed Tansypaw?"

Sagepaw freezes, and not only because of the water. "He fell."

As if on cue the water feels noticeably warmer. The fire roars, spitting and thrashing at the liquid. Sagepaw hisses as the fire almost licks his tail. The water's little ripples rage as Sagepaw quickly lunges through the water in a panic.

"No, he didn't. You killed him. Oh, you thought no one saw? Well I did. You killed him." Scarletpaw's voice is laden with anger.

"I did what I had to," Sagepaw's own voice quivers. But he knows

that's not right. Is it? It can't be. Real warriors don't kill. Do they? No. But Tansypaw was going to kill him. Wasn't he? Either way, Sagepaw is only trying to convince himself. He did what he had to.

"You had to kill my brother? Give me one reason. One reason why I shouldn't throw you into that fire," Scarletpaw nods at the raging orange. Sagepaw flinches.

I haven't lived yet, Sagepaw thinks desperately, but that isn't good enough. Because Tansypaw didn't. He lived his life as a seven moon old kit. That isn't right. So what other reasons, that aren't stupid, aren't kit-like, aren't selfish or rude, does Sagepaw have? Only one, one desperate reason.

"Voidflicker told you not to," Sagepaw whimpers pathetically, "I'll find my siblings by myself, but what have they done wrong?"

Scarletpaw purses her lips, eyes darting from the fire to Sagepaw. The tom braces himself, alert and ready. He is standing now, teeth bared against each other. Scarletpaw finally breathes, looking annoyed and broken all at once.

"Fine. Find your siblings."

Sagepaw breathes too. A breath of relief, pure joy. He nods tensely to Scarletpaw, before shooting out of the river with muddy water sticking to his pelt.

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Flickerpaw's POV

Flickerpaw coughs, feeling his lungs seize up with his wheezes. The thick, black, smoke covering everything and everyone. Ivykit sticks stubbornly to his side, Smoothpaw to his left, and Aloestar in front of them all. Ivykit is two moons younger than Flickerpaw, five moons old, but it seems like she doesn't deserve the title of kit. She is mature, somewhat snappy, and demanding towards Flickerpaw.

Riverclan trudges behind the Thunderclan cats, though Flickerpaw doesn't quite know why. They say they can help everyone get to the river, but why bring the kits and queens? It makes no sense to
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Flickerpaw.

"Podcall, keep up!" A black she-cat that blends in with the thick smoke calls back. In response she gets a rough and painful sounding cough. Flickerpaw mirrors it with his own.

"Flickerpaw," Aloestar turns, eyes worried, "have you seen little Echokit? He was falling behind and-"

"He's here," Smoothpaw stops her brisk trot, which almost looks like a canter, to grab a little bluish kit. He mewls sleepily, eyes closing. His little cough is pitiful and sad. Flickerpaw breaks into a slight run.

"Mom-" Flickerpaw stops to scold himself. He's not a kit anymore. "*Aloestar.* Me and Smoothpaw could run up with the kits, and sit with them in the river." Flickerpaw hopes no cat hears the panic in his voice, because every cat is so calm. But not Flickerpaw. Is that wrong?

"I mean...sure, I guess. Try to see if you can find Sagepaw," Aloestar's eyes flash with something unreadable, "and, I guess, Snapstar."

Flickerpaw doesn't question her hesitation. They are seven moons old. There is a raging fire, though it does seem to be a good way away. It's just the smoke, causing relentless coughing and burning eyes. But too much inhaled smoke for the little ones and...

Flickerpaw scoops up a weak little bundle of fur, a tortoiseshell, who'd long stopped walking. Her breaths are shallow and weak, and her eyes barely crack open when she is moved from the hot ground into Flickerpaw's jaws. The tom can't help but feel she won't make it.

"Why are we letting apprentices take my kits?" the queen's evil glare sends shivers, even in the relentless heat, through Flickerpaw. Aloestar answers for him.

"They're the fastest. Blossomkit is weak. Do you want her t-"

"No," the queen answers quickly, angrily, "but you can't just take my

kits away. I'll bring them myself. I'll-"

"Let them go," Turtlesplash, leader of Riverclan, warns, "They're Snapstar's young." Flickerpaw feels an describable jolt of pain at the words. Snapstar's young? Barely. Does he even care for any cat but himself?

And Sagepaw.

Smoothpaw and Flickerpaw weave around Aloestar holding the little kits. Echokit mews in protest, looking grumpy. Blossomkit is silent and still. Flickerpaw fears the worst.

A little body, a head shorter than Flickerpaw, glares from in front of the two. Two other miniature warriors slip to the little one's side. Smoothpaw stops, casting a confused look at the tiny cats.

Ivykit's little blue eyes glare up at the two, her glower so intense it might have been *her* kits the siblings were taking away. The two toms mean mug the two, but they look silly and goofy. Ivykit does not. She looks ready to bite. Flickerpaw almost laughs. Where are these three's parents?

"I'm coming with you." Not a question. A statement. The nerve!

"No," Smoothpaw says sternly, glowering back. A statement too. Ivykit has met her match.

"Yes," the two toms answer in sync, like Ivykit's little minions. Cleftkit grins a goofy grin, which he quickly stomps in favor of another glare. Whitekit's eyes remain hard, demanding.

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes!"

Ivykit looks effectively annoyed. And bratty. Flickerpaw doesn't have time for this.

"Listen, Ivykit," Smoothpaw spits impatiently, "Do you know what is at my paws-" The she-cat pauses to nod at the little slumped kit she'd placed down earlier. "A kit. And what's in Flickerpaw's- it's a *dying* kit. And behind us? A huge fire. So move or I'll kick you."

Ivykit huffs, though her expression hardens much more, into a somewhat serious mask. "I'm a kit too."

Her voice is small, sad, but somehow sincere.

The she-kit's brothers droop sadly, their eyes downward, pitiful. "Us too. We're not warriors yet."

The three leave quietly, tails downward. Smoothpaw picks up her kits, speaking no more. Flickerpaw isn't in the mood either.

They sprint, creeping low to escape from the smoke. Flickerpaw can't feel Blossomkit jerk, or squirm, or mew, or even cough anymore. But he feels her heart beat, fast and terrified. Just like his.

The fire's roar is more audible near the river. Flickerpaw can't find out why, until he does.

His eyes flick up towards the river, heart filling with relief for a few seconds. But that's it. A few seconds. A few seconds before Flickerpaw sees red. Red and orange, intertwined in a fiery wall, eating up the brush on the other side of the river.

Relief bleeds into panic, panic into pain, emotional anguish, as Blossomkit completely stills.

As her breaths are no longer audible.

Chapter 13-

Sagepaw's POV

The smell of death is sickening. Almost as sickening as the bile caught in his throat. Almost as sickening as the smell of burning wood. But at least there are no bodies burning.

Sagepaw can't put his paw on which cat is dead, but he knows it has to be some cat he knows. Because his stomach squirms with grief already.

The breaks into a sprint, running blindly as the river's current works to make him fall. The water is deeper here, cooler. The fire reels backward, extinguishing quickly. Sagepaw is glad for that, but the sickening smell buries the feeling of happiness and safety. Because he's not safe, not yet, not ever.

"Stop!"

Flickerpaw's voice breaks even the smoke, and Sagepaw can see him. His red-rimmed eyes, his matted and wet fur. His voice, so weak, tainted by smoke. His paws, holding a still little body.

"Sagepaw-"

Smoothpaw is cut off by a little kit's voice, so soft and honestly pathetic.

"Can you...tell me..." she pauses to cough and wheeze, and Sagepaw's heart wretches, "the story...with the tree and...the storm?" The words sound painful, and not only for the kit. Sagepaw knows the story she is talking about, The Storm Tree. But how does it go? How does it go?

"I don't... I don't..." Flickerpaw's voice trembles, and Smoothpaw collapses beside him in a quivering blob. Sagepaw is the only one

standing, his joints buckled. His face is smooth and numb, but his mind is anything but silent.

"-know that one," Smoothpaw finishes, her eyes defeated.

"Mom-ma...lied," the kit squeezes out, her chest heaving with her tiny coughs, "she said...Starclan takes the pain...away to... the Dark...Forest." Her words are getting slower, Sagepaw realizes in a panic. Smoothpaw stands, eyes streaming with tears.

"I'm getting Tumblecry."

"She's dying," Sagepaw answers quietly, hoping the little male kit doesn't hear. Smoothpaw's eyes droop, sadness replaced with anger.

"You don't know that," she whispers breathlessly, "you don't..." The kit interrupts quietly, cutting into their conversation.

"But...then...why does it... hurt s-o much?" The kit's eyes, once cracked, close fully, and her hitched breathing slows. It seems like she is just resting, closing her eyes, surrounded by those who will miss her.

Sagepaw doesn't know this kit, but just seeing her brother cry over her, wailing, unravels the seams holding together Sagepaw's life.

They bury her next to the river.

~~~

The fire, slowly but surely, dissipates next to the river. Turns out it wasn't only the kit, who now Sagepaw knows as Blossomkit, who died. An elder from Shadowclan was lost along the way, too slow to keep up. His daughter, Juniperjump, grieves with wails and weeps and boo-hoos. It's annoying.

But she has lost everyone, Smoothpaw says.

"She lost her mom a while ago, or that's what Aloestar said. Her father was lost in the smoke, left behind. They won't let her go back. And Cragkit, her three moon old, is lost in the crowd. Or maybe run off into the woods. Her mate... nobody knows of one."
~~~

Sagepaw doesn't like the sound of pure grief and helplessness. Maybe he can turn those pitiful wails into smiles and tears of relief. Like that'd make him feel different, but still.

Sagepaw has done everything today. Everything. He'd informed the pathetic queen that her 'poor baby' was dead and returned her mewling scrap back to her. She'd swiped at him, asking him 'why he acted like this was a joke.' It isn't, wasn't, so he'd only turned and let her swipe at air.

He'd picked Flickerpaw up off of the unsafe ground, set him into the water. He'd made a low sobbing sound, tears streaming. Sagepaw licked between his ears, tears coming himself. The grief was overwhelming, but, for some reason, the words that came out of his mouth were smooth and calm.

"It'll be okay."

So what's one more thing?

Sagepaw won't waste time on an old elder, a bag of bones trapped somewhere with black smoke filling his lungs. The kit's disappearance is recent; his mother swears up and down he'd been at her paws when they reached the river. So he had to be here, or somewhere close.

"Where you going?" Smoothpaw says, her voice laced with concern. Sagepaw rises to his paws, contemplating asking her to come. But he desperately wants to be alone. So he shakes his head.

"For a walk," he deadpans. When Smoothpaw's eyes flash with concern and her mouth opens, he corrects himself. "Joking. I was joking. I'm looking for the kit."

"Let me come," Smoothpaw answers instantly, causing anger to bubble up in Sagepaw. No.

"I need to be alone," Sagepaw says firmly, his claws working at the creek bottom, "I won't go far."

Smoothpaw tries to raise her voice threateningly, but it results in a large coughing fit. Sagepaw blinks at his sister slowly, before

quickly trotting off. Beyond the river. Beyond safety.

Is this a bad idea?

Sagepaw pads on ash-covered land. In fact, the brittle flakes still float. Yewpaw had guessed that a fire still raged elsewhere. Sagepaw doesn't trust him fully, but this theory does seem correct. The ash is red, almost vermilion, and still burning hot. It burns Sagepaw's paws as his walks. A kit is ten times shorter, so it must hurt way more, with the ash a bit higher on the paw.

Huh. Being tiny again. A strange thought.

Sagepaw tries to ignore the feeling of death in the woods. The shrubs, dead. The plants, dead. The trees, dead.

But, according to Aloestar, all good things burn before they really live.

"Mom-ma? Momma?"

A little voice sounds through the trees. Sagepaw's ears prick as he steps delicately over a charred log. The little voice is getting further, so he turns. It's the wrong way. Turn again. Hot, cold, hot, cold. Finally, Sagepaw sets off in the right direction.

"Not your Momma," Sagepaw calls into the forest, to no response. A realization hits Sagepaw, and it feels cruel. He is a stranger, possibly dangerous. His words sound like a threat. His clue, his lead, is demolished.

"I'm...here to find you... for Juniperjump!" Sagepaw tries again, his word more gentle this time. Carefuller.

"I'm lost," a little voice sounds, closer than ever, and then a little tortoiseshell head pokes out from behind a barely standing tree, "I'm scared."

How long has he hid?

Sagepaw's eyes soften, and the urge to lick the poor kit between the ears arises inside of him.

"Can you come back to the river? The fire could still spread."

The kit's eyes flash with pure terror as he shakes his head 'no.' Sagepaw frowns at the response.

"Momma's too sad... that place must be sad too. And scary!" The kit frets quietly, emerging from behind the tree fully now, "But it's too dark here...and hot...but I'm gonna get back to Shadowclan camp!" The tom pauses to cough, eyes red with how much they're watering. "Can you help me?"

Sagepaw pauses, his frown feeling embedded into his face. The kit's pleading eyes bore into his, his lip quivering in fear. Poor thing.

"I can't."

The kit's little eyes widen, and then his mouth curls into a little grimace. It is almost laughable.

"But...But..."

"What do you love about Shadowclan camp?" Sagepaw interrupts quickly.

"Well my nest...and friends... And the prey!" he finishes with a painful sounding cough.

"Well all of those things have burned, and your friends are at the river," Sagepaw says, a pain stabbing into his heart at the realization, "So come on."

The kit frowns deeply, but he seems to be considering it. Finally, he sighs. "Rweally?" His little voice is sad, pitiful, really, but honestly concerned.

"Yes."

The kit looks at his paws. "Okay, fine."

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The kit hangs from Sagepaw's jaws as he walks quickly towards the
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river. The smoke makes it hard for both of them not to suffocate in it, making unwanted memories pop back up in his head.

Sagepaw has no interest in being wailed in front of, happily or not, so he drops the kit in the chaos of the river. "Find your mother." The kit's big doe eyes stare up at him.

"Won't you come?"

"Not now. Tell your mommy 'hi' for me." Sagepaw turns to walk away briskly.

The apprentice trots over to his siblings who lay together, sleeping almost peacefully at the side of the river. Their breaths are calm, though their coughs are worrying. Tumblecry has neglected to check on any of them, favoring kits and warriors over the apprentices. Which is okay. Sagepaw is content right now, even with the pain in his chest.

Because hero is a much better title than murderer.

Chapter 14-

"Where's Snapstar?"

Yewpaw sits uncomfortably close to Sagepaw, eyes darting up at the sky, which is a dark blue. Sagepaw tries not to flinch.

"I think...he might have died in the fire..." he says quickly, trying to sound casual. That is not a lie. He could have died. Or he could've run off like a pitiful coward... No. Snapstar wouldn't do that.

"So...uh." Yewpaw's voice is quick, in that sly and nervous way Sagepaw already recognizes, "Right. I'm so sorry... but...like, do you miss him?"

Sagepaw would be angry, but all he feels is emptiness. He bares his teeth and works at the dirt with his claws out. "Of course I do. What is wrong with you?"

"Well...uh... he did try to stop my sister from being a warrior by...uh...force."

Sagepaw turns on the tom, reeling to face him again. The river at their feet is their 'new home' yet now it seems endless and unknown. "What?"

"Yeah. Fallowpaw, well... you know... they didn't get along quite well," Yewpaw's paws are dyed brown with dirt, so he quickly rinses them in the slow-moving water. His whiskers quiver as he licks his lips. "Trout sucks, doesn't it? I miss mice."

And just like the fire, the topic of Snapstar is gone. Just like the leader himself, disappearing into the smoke. *"F-Fire-"*

Fire. The thing that broke Sagepaw's life into pieces.

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Sagepaw's life is fragile, his mind is fragile. Could it shatter again? Is Starclan really that cruel? Or is it Starclan at all, watching over him now? After Tansypaw, do they still think him worthy of their ranks? Probably not.

Life is also a routine. Train with Smoothpaw, hunt with Smoothpaw, bat away desperate Yewpaw, sleep, wake up concerned for Flickerpaw. The praise is sickening each time a Shadowclan cat comes in contact with him. Little Cragkit had blabbed to his mommy about a white and orange 'apwentice' that saved him. Later, Smoothpaw revealed him. Snitch.

Right now the Shadowclan cat is a white tom with shining golden eyes that glow with almost-pride. Sagepaw shrinks, feeling almost annoyed, but also honored.

"Hey, kit," the tom smiles teasingly, "Thanks for helping my Cragkit." Sagepaw feels himself freeze, and his mouth pulls up into a fake grin.

"Um, yeah, okay. You're welcome," the tom forces out his laugh, and it is painful. His throat is still rough, as is every cat's. "My, uh, pleasure?"

The tom laughs, waving his tail. "So, Sagepaw, saw you as an itty bitty scrap-"

"Yeah," Sagepaw intercepts, waving his tail dismissively, "everybody kinda did." The tom nods enthusiastically.

"I'm Eaglesnap. It's only fair 'ya know me. You know, uh, with Cragkit and all. He wants to see you."

No.

Sagepaw offers a tight, uncomfortable, smile. He doesn't want to see any more annoying Shadowclan warriors, even if, technically, they were of the same clan. But not really.

Aloestar said in the olden days, before the territories shifted from a
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lake to a tiny wood barely able to feed all of the clans, Shadowclan warriors adored signs and darkness. Foxes feared them. Their symbols are signs and ability to ambush made them feared by clan cats too. Slinky and dishonest, Aloestar called them.

Until they were forced to work with Thunderclan during the war.

Sagepaw's pelt ripples with unease. Aloestar's uneasy eyes prick into his mind.

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Sagekit sits, his pelt brushing his littermates.

"What happened, Momma? You can just not *tell us!"*

Aloestar sighs, scooping up her giggling herd of kits near her chest. The she-cats chest fluff engulfs Sagekit, causing a mess of tangled fur and spitting.

Sagekit can feel her heartbeat, a constant reminder of life. It's calming.

Flickerkit and Smoothkit's giggles fill the air as Aloestar snuggles them in, and her eyes sweep over them.

"Okay, okay, fine. Shadowclan's pride got the best of them, and they broke from us. They fought with Windclan after we moved here, to our new home. That's when me and your...father... were just apprenticed," Aloestar's voice is hesitant, unsure. Sagekit's eyes find his mother's face.

"What else happened-"

A booming voice breaks into Sagekit's sentence. The voice is immediately recognized.

The one they cannot see.

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"No thanks."

Sagepaw is sure Eaglesnap looks disappointed, but he slivers away

before the tom can comment.

The freshkill pile has only one prey item. Fish.

They reak, stinking up the entire camp with how much they smell like salt and slime and the distinctive scent of fish. Riverclan insists the flopping things taste fresh and delicious, but Sagepaw prefers dry food. How do cats enjoy the feeling of wet, squirming, meat sliding down their throat?

Sagepaw wrinkles his nose and tries not to breathe. It smells too gross, too rotten. The image of a nutty-smelling, delectable, meal of mice and squirrel flashes in Sagepaw's head. He has never craved the forest more.

Sagepaw leans down, sinking his teeth into the foul-smelling fish. It flops down, its scales shining in the mid-day sun. Another patrol had just left, to check Riverclan camp. Is it still able to be lived in? The nest-littered tiny stream is getting too cold for the kits and queens, Leaf-bare about to wrap its cold hands around the world. The trees are already dropping their leaves in favor of the frigid weather. The kits already bundle together, diving under their mother's fluff. Dens are their only chance, and if they can't find any...

"Sagepaw?"

A small voice, as tiny as the scales on the disgusting fish, pipes up. Sagepaw turns, recognizing the tiny voice. Cragkit.

The little kit bounces toward Sagepaw, his excitement palpable. His little upturned mouth screams innocence, his eyes shining like a pool of stars. Sagepaw smiles a bit, a genuine smile. It feels good.

"Hi, hi, hi, *hi!"* Cragkit rants with a mini cough, as bouncy as a rabbit. Sagepaw can't even blink before Cragkit is swatting at his own tail and rambling off incomplete and irrelevant sentences.

"And...And... when I'm an apprentice I'll- And do you know when you're an apprentice you can fight in battles? And, like, I get to learn, like, sign language? For the shadows!"

Sagepaw snickers at the kit, pushing Cragkit's wriggling body off of his paws. Cragkit flashes a toothy grin. "Dada said I'll be the best warrior, the best! Since I'm so... ad-ven-tour-us."

Sagepaw rolls his eyes, wondering why he'd refused to see such a kit. "It's adventurous."

"It's a big word!" Cragkit argues with a stubborn huff.

"Right," Sagepaw nods in mock-agreement, "Where's your mom?"

Cragkit turns his head, nodding across the river, into the barren forest. The undergrowth is transformed into soot and ash, the only thing standing being charred, lonely, trees. "Findin' Riverclan!"

"But she's a queen?" Sagepaw says confusedly, tilting his head to the right.

"And I'm a kit!" Cragkit rolls his wide eyes, flopping down at Sagepaw's paws once again. Sagepaw sighs and shuffles the kit off of them.

"Your dad?"

"Hunting!" The kit exclaims happily, tail whisking, almost like a dog's, "Guess you'll have 'ta watch me!" Cragkit's eyes narrow almost-threateningly. "Or I might get lost again." Who knew a kit could blackmail?

"You're from Shadowclan," Sagepaw says simply, turning to his fish again. It seems to blink at his straightforwardness. "I'm from Thunderclan. That's why I can't see you."

Cragkit's eyes harden like pebbles in stream, his kit-like happiness fading. "Okay." The little kit turns and whisks his tail.

And just like that, Cragkit gets lost in the crowd.

Chapter 15-

Sagepaw eats in silence. That's how it's always been, right? Lonely.

The patrol of cats, mostly Riverclan but some Shadowclan cats too, arrives shortly after, their tails waving in excitement. Pelts twitch and mouths are upturned. Sagepaw sits with semi-excited Smoothpaw and eerily silent Flickerpaw.

Aloestar perches on a stack of boulders and smooth stream stones, but she isn't much higher than the crowd. With the pursing of her lips, the buzzing crowd silences, and the quiet is silky and soft on Sagepaw's ears. Finally.

"Riverclan's leader den still stands," Aloestar booms into the crowd, skipping the calling of the clan meeting, "all kits and queens should leave now. Cracklight, Flickerpaw, go with them. They'll need hunters and you two can help rebuild the camp."

Flickerpaw shows no emotion with his nod, but Sagepaw knows he is glad. Ever since the fire, the... death... of Blossomkit, Pondscour has been too broken and angry to care much for poor Echokit. Flickerpaw usually watches after the kit, making his life so much harder. But he doesn't mind, Sagepaw can tell.

Aloestar discusses more important matters, like rebuilding and perhaps moving farther into the woods north, but every cat disagrees. Finally, after the queens and kits scramble to Riverclan, the remaining cats are left. Aloestar's eyes dart over the gathered crowd.

"I want us to separate, and go our own ways once more, if that's possible. Both Thunderclan's and Shadowclan's camps are destroyed, but rebuilding is possible. I ask us to speed up the process by returning to our camps and...beginning reconstruction."

Instantly, the cats are engulfed in arguments and snarling matches,

each holding a different opinion. Sagepaw flatten his ears and studies his paws. How destroyed are the camps? Can they really return?

Turtlesplash's sharp mew silences the crowd once more. "Quiet!"

The calico she-cat's pelt shines in the evening sun, her orange spots looking as red as the bright vermilion sky. Her eyes flash with anger, before smoothing into something else. Maybe worry. Sagepaw isn't exactly great at reading emotions when he's already struggling to decipher his own.

"Aloestar's word is only truth," she begins loudly, her words holding power, "Will we stay here forever, moping around? No. We should return to our camps. The queens and kits should not be at Riverclan, or at the river. Shadowclan kits should not be playing like Riverclan kits. They should be in their home, correct?"

Murmurs and mutters of agreement sound, some enthusiastically, but still. Sagepaw doesn't know if he agrees, but Turtlesplash looks like she knows what she's doing, so he nods. Smoothpaw's face breaks into a smile, her tail waving excitedly.

"Sagepaw, we get to go home!" she exclaims quietly, leaping to her paws, "We can rebuild, and reconstruct. I'll miss Parsleypaw but-"

"Who's that?" Sagepaw asks. Not like he cares, but his sister should know he's at least kind of listening.

"Oh um... not your business. She's a friend, really. She's sweet and kind and funny-"

"I get it. Sorry for asking," Sagepaw mumbles, eyes glued to Aloestar. The she-cat smiles at Turtlesplash, dipping her head, before jumping into the crowd of cats. Sagepaw can't see her anymore.

"Will there even be a home left?"

A new voice breaks in, a familiar voice. Yewpaw. Smoothpaw turns instantly, her eyes already annoyed. "You could've, 'ya know, not eavesdropped. But whatever. Isn't that what toms do?" Yewpaw's

eyes flash with a playful challenge.

"Sure it is. But we're also best at hunting. Right, Sagepaw?"

Sagepaw blinks, refocusing. Yewpaw's cheeky grin breaks his decent mood. Why is the tom so happy, with all the death and grief? For some reason, Sagepaw feels jealous.

It is a mostly new feeling, since in his kit-hood he was envied and praised endlessly. He felt like a prince, like royalty. But now, who praised him, and for what? For sitting around? No, he'd regain the praise during reconstruction.

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"Come... *on!"*

Smoothpaw's huff grabs Sagepaw's focus from his muddy paws to her frustrated face.

"What?" he asks, confused. Smoothpaw has beaten him in den-building so far, her side of the nursery looking much cleaner and smoother.

"The sticks keep...falling!" Smoothpaw sighs like a kit who didn't get her way, "I liked the apprentice den better."

"That's 'cause you got to sleep in there, lazy mouse," Flickerpaw says in a dead-pan. Smoothpaw glares at the tom, but Flickerpaw doesn't even move.

The queens and kits came back from Riverclan, tired and annoyed from the back and forth travels. Quickly, the clans were sorted into their groups and they set off with no farewells. Flickerpaw came back with Echokit in his jaws, his eyes sad and concerned.

"Pondscour hasn't been feeding him... or talking to him... or anything. Echokit only asked to play moss ball... and she said he's a nuisance and that he'll never be as special to her as Blossomkit," he'd explained hurriedly, "I don't want to take him away from his mom...but he has to come back with us. Pondscour won't even look at him."
~~~

But Aloestar had refused, and now Flickerpaw seems more broken than ever.

Sagepaw feels bad for him, but what can he do? Echokit is probably far away now, all the way in Riverclan, the only clan supposed to be separated from Thunderclan. Alone, hungry, ignored, probably not even knowing Flickerpaw was willing to take him somewhere where he'll be cared for. Or he would've been cared for.

But that doesn't matter now. What matters is his home, and making sure it's safe. Right now, the apprentice's den and warrior's den are completed, the nursery following. The clan bustles with cats rebuilding the clan walls, collecting moss, and helping Tumblecry find herbs in the barren territory.

Sagepaw tries to focus on being positive. His mind buzzes with the words *at least.* Because at least they don't have to eat fish anymore; Fringestrike and Orejump had arrived in camp with three measly mice and one squirrel, spreading word of more of them taking shelter in the already re-growing undergrowth. Yet, most have probably fled north. But that doesn't matter. They have food, even if Sagepaw doesn't get even a bite because of the elders, queens, and kits swooping in to grab up the prey.

So many at least's. Isn't that a good thing?

Sagepaw rolls his eyes at huffing Smoothpaw and tries to smile. Smoothpaw smiles back. Flickerpaw doesn't.

Just as Sagepaw moves to stick more moss with mud to the twigs for extra installation, the new walls rustle, marking some cat's arrival. It seems all eyes turn to the cats entering.

Their pelts shine, slicked to their skin. They look professional. Sagepaw, however, isn't quite fooled. He narrows his eyes.

And then he widens them. The scent is familiar. The scent of moor and rabbits and wild-growing heather. Windclan.

The cat in the front stands tall, his jet-black fur shimmering, a stark contrast to Aloestar's white pelt. Her blue eyes are weary and

aggressive.

"Voidflicker," she spits, "what do you want?"

The black tom's name sends shivers into Sagepaw, and he lowers his paws from the walls just to cower. Smoothpaw casts him a confused look.

"We want your kits," Voidflicker's voice booms, echoing through camp, "and we want them *now."*

Chapter 16-

Sagepaw huddles with Smoothpaw and Flickerpaw his side, his heart thumping in his chest. "What is he on?" Smoothpaw whispers into Sagepaw's ears. Sagepaw can't move to answer.

Voidflicker's one-eyed gaze falls onto Sagepaw and his littermates, but only for a second, before cats stream out of dens, fur bristling and tails lashing. Warriors flood into camp, their claws unsheathed and teeth bared. Aloestar leaps onto Voidflicker, blood spraying, and then the battle starts.

Sagepaw rushes his siblings into the very back of the apprentices den, where they cower to watch the battle. It feels wrong, just watching, shielded from the blood and fear. Like kits. Isn't this battle about them? Shouldn't they be fighting? But no, that'd be stupid. In the open they'd be so easy to catch. Here, protected by afternoon shadows, it is harder to get them. Some cat would see. Some cat.

"Why are they fighting over us?" Flickerpaw mutters breathlessly, before turning accusatory eyes to Sagepaw, "You know something, don't you?"

Sagepaw freezes, eyes wandering to Flickerpaw. "N-No."

"You do," Smoothpaw agrees in a whisper, "You've come home smelling of Windclan before, after disappearing as a kit. And every single time we can't find you... the fire... the training session... you come home smelling like rabbit. What can't you tell us?"

Sagepaw crumbles, right there. Tears sting his eyes and his throat closes completely. "Dad..." he chokes, "Snapstar...is not...our dad."

Flickerpaw and Smoothpaw react very differently. Smoothpaw

explodes, screeching. Her choking sobs are drowned out by battle, but still. Flickerpaw only twitches, his eyes lighting with hurt and grief.

"Liar!" Smoothpaw breathes, eyes brightening with rage, "you...you... you just want attention! Like you always do. You never wanted to...let me or Flickerpaw...get close to dad! He died in the fire, and you're trying to make...it...seem like-"?

"I'm not a liar!" Sagepaw thunders, surprised at his anger, "He didn't die in the fire, you know? He *left* us, like a coward! He's not our dad, and you know it. You know it..."

Smoothpaw's sobs stop and she sucks in a breath, whisking her tail. "Fine, I believe you," she says quietly, "If he's not, though, then I'll find out who is."

"And that you will."

The voice is eerily familiar, ringing in Sagepaw's ears, before his skull is dunked into the back stone wall, and everything goes black.

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Sagepaw wakes surrounded by warmth, uncanny warmth. A fire.

It rages, burning the trees around. The air, once smelling so sweet and beautiful, to be honest, is now tainted by smoke. The brighter-than-average sun is blotted out with clouds of smoke. Sagepaw is horrified, because it was him that started this fire.

In Starclan.

Cats, kits, flee from the woods, mouths moving with no words. The heat of the flames sear Sagepaw's paws, but he can't move. The flames scoot closer, closer, and the wave of cats stops. Sagepaw doesn't move an inch. This is his fault.

Your fault. Your fault.

The words are implanted into his head, cramming themselves into his thoughts. He can't think of anything else.
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Your fault. Your fault.

Nothing hurts more.

Finally, the fire reaches Sagepaw. It pauses, as if screaming at him to move. But he doesn't. Running out of patience, the fire passes over the apprentice. Burning him into ash.

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The heat from the dream lingers as Sagepaw groggily opens his eyes. Instantly, his head throbs with pain, a sticky poultice clinging to his fur there. Smoothpaw and Flickerpaw are curled into balls next to him, too.

Sagepaw's nose twitches at the foul smell of fear and blood. The scents intertwine and then melt into Sagepaw's terror.

Where are they?

"Flickerpaw, Smoothpaw," Sagepaw rasps, throat dry and painful. His head sends pain rocketing through his body with the words. "Wake up."

Flickerpaw's white body stirs, his blue eyes cracking open a bit. The narrowed pin points are only there for a moment, before they slip closed again. The tom groans groggily. Smoothpaw doesn't even move.

"No," Sagepaw says firmly, "Wake. *Up."*

Flickerpaw's eyes open, but this time they widen with something that looks like panic. "I-I- We're in...Windclan...aren't we?" He mutters, stirring again. Instantly, Sagepaw's fuzzy memory returns.

Blood, Flickerpaw's blue eyes, Smoothpaw's pleading... Sagepaw can't remember anymore.

"They...they said...they'd kill you if we didn't come... s-so we did. And then they fed us poppy seeds so we'd sleep...when we got...here. My-my...head hurts." Flickerpaw explains, collapsing into the moss under them.
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"Mine too," Smoothpaw's groggy voice is finally audible, "but... that doesn't matter. We have to...to go."

Paw steps sound, muffled, on the moss. Sagepaw realizes they are facing a wall, so he twists around with a wince.

A familiar form steps towards Sagepaw, one green eye shining with pleasure. "I need Sagepaw."

"No," Smoothpaw growls protectively, stumbling to her paws. Voidflicker laughs as the she-cat stands over her brother. He only steps forward again.

"I said *no."* Smoothpaw's voice is laced with worry, but also fierceness. Voidflicker's laugh fades instantly.

"Too bad."

With one quick paw, Voidflicker knocks Smoothpaw off of Sagepaw. Sagepaw doesn't bother to hiss before his scruff is seized and he is all but dragged out of the den.

The sunlight causes Sagepaw to wince, blinking and narrowing his eyes. There are no trees to block out their rays, like the tom is used to. Sagepaw closes his eyes and tries to breathe.

"I question first, and then you get your questions," Voidflicker smiles innocently, like he finds this amusing, "Okay?"

Sagepaw tries his pelt to prop himself up on something, but there is almost nothing to do so. So instead he painfully wobbles onto his paws. "Okay," he winces, but he's so clearly not okay.

"First," Voidflicker starts, sitting down, "you didn't see a murder, did you? Scarletpaw told me so. What did you see?"

"That's two questions," Sagepaw growls, eyes narrowed. Voidflicker's eyes roll.

"I'll ask as many questions as I want."

"I'll answer as many as I want."

The look of annoyance on Voidflicker's face feels good.

His claws on Sagepaw's muzzle do not.

"Fine," Sagepaw stumbles, regaining his balance. His headache is only getting worse out here. "I thought it was a murder. I was a kit- I didn't really know what... murder was. So... no. I didn't see a murder. I don't really know what I saw. Two cats fighting... over a weasel? I think...but no one stopped it and they just scattered... One was super hurt though. Bleeding."

"Good," Voidflicker's gaze is troubled, but he shakes his head and it clears, "Next. Where is Snapstar. I have...business with him."

What business?

"Well I don't," Sagepaw spits, "How should I know?" Voidflicker's look of annoyance comes back, but this time Sagepaw feels he isn't in a position to feel good.

"He got lost in the fire," Sagepaw elaborates.

Lost. Sagepaw knows he's not lost. If a Windclan apprentice could find him in a foreign territory during a fire, Snapstar surely isn't lost. And he isn't dead. Wouldn't they have found their body? So is that a lie? But Sagepaw doesn't know why Snapstar left, not truly. Is he just a coward? Has he always been that way?

"Lost?" Voidflicker laughs, "He left you." Sagepaw bares his teeth, but Voidflicker is probably right, for once. He doesn't argue.

"I'm being nice, you know. Not killing you. There's a lot of cats who want you and your dad dead," Voidflicker says, his whiskers twitching with amusement, "But anyways, It's your turn to ask questions."

Relief washes over Sagepaw. He sighs, his head still pounding. Questions swirl in his head, but he chooses one randomly. "Is Snapstar really not my father?"

Voidflicker's tail flicks with annoyance, sighing. "Yes, obviously. I would know."

Cool. Gave me more questions than answers.

"How would *you* know?"

Voidflicker's eyes brighten. He looks almost excited. "I'm his brother."

Shock hits Sagepaw like a pair of clawed paws. His eyes widen as his mind absorbs the new information. Voidflicker's face looks disgusted at the words. He scowls, licking his chest once.

Sagepaw's mind feels jumbled now. Questions swirl like a fast-moving river. But there is only one that seems right. Maybe he'd get an actual answer now.

"Why did you take us? What business do you have with us?"

Voidflicker grins like a kit who'd just taken the moss ball in their game. His tail whisks once, whiskers twitching.

"I just wanted to see my kits again."

Chapter 17

Sagepaw stumbles back into the sheltered den, which appears to be a dug-out hole with moss inside of it.

Smoothpaw and Flickerpaw look up in relief before Sagepaw is pushed into the moss. Flickerpaw hisses.

"Get off of him!" The white tom growls through bared teeth, tail lashing. He stands, more steadily this time. Smoothpaw joins him, and the two make a small wall in front of Sagepaw. They must know how hurt he is.

"I'm not here to hurt you," Voidflicker assures the three, "*Any* of you." Sagepaw's littermates don't relax, but instead let out a snarl.

"Prove it," Smoothpaw spits, "Tell us why in Starclan we're here." Voidflicker's eyes harden in impatience.

"Because you're my kits, and you will remain that way, if you like it or not," the tom snarls angrily, "You'll become Windclan warriors, like it should've been. Now, if you want to hear the story, shut *up."*

Sagepaw wobbles to his paws, eyes searching his sibling's faces. Smoothpaw's is of anguish, tears shining in her eyes. Shock glimmers in Flickerpaw's eyes, but also confusion and anger. Sagepaw is in emotional agony. Why can't they have *one* good dad?

"Good," Voidflicker mutters, tail lashing, before he jumps into the story, "There used to be four clans, like now, but all separated into territories fitting their strengths. Me, Snapkit, and Crackkit were born into Windclan. Waspkit was born dead. Snapkit was... adventurous. Crackkit too. But not me."

"Okay, so you're a coward too? Good to know," Smoothpaw spits, eyes rolling, "I don't *care.* How in Starclan are we your kits."

Voidflicker shoots her a deadly glare.

"The war started just as something happened to the lake. The water caused sickness. Starclan was mad at us for the war. But nothing changed, so we were forced to move without Starclan's approval. I think...Starclan wished to punish us. Punish me and Snapstrike, because we'd threatened the clans into leaving..."

"How does this help us?" Sagepaw explodes, "You're supposed to explain to us how, *why,* we're here today. Not confess to how and when you were a bad cat. Tell us something of importance, you mangy rabbit eater!" Anger streams out of Sagepaw's jaws, and he doesn't regret one word.

Voidflicker glares, but to Sagepaw's disappointment, there is no hurt in his eyes.

"Aloepaw joined us during the journey," Voidflicker continues sharply, and the three prick their ears, "She was such a good hunter, and kind and funny back then. I liked her. But-"

"-so did Snapstar..." Smoothpaw finished, scuffing her paws on moss, eyes flashing with anger, "So what happened? Was it a race? Was it a-"

"Shh," Sagepaw says for once, his head throbbing with the realization. But he wants to hear more, to see how this happened.

"No," Voidflicker growls, looking hurt and confused for the first time, "Snapstrike was a confident prick, but he was charming. Her first litter of kits was on the journey, only a small little orange she-kit named Maplekit. Snapstrike was the leader at this point and a father now... Igloostar had died to wolves. But he went without his name or lives. He wanted a successor, not a deputy, because he said one great leader could help prevent war... but it only made things worse."

Sagepaw breathes a sigh. Yes, this helps, but when do they come in? When does Aloestar become Voidflicker's mate?

"But Snapstar wanted a tom-kit, not a she-kit. He told me this, and

then the next day she 'wandered off.' But...but... there was orange fur beneath his claws," Voidflicker's eyes flash with pure anger, his muscles tensing like he's ready to pounce on a Snapstar that's not here, "Aloestar wanted more kits. Maybe it was coping. Maybe it wasn't. But she didn't want kits with Snapstrike anymore. We were a better couple. Love birds. Kits came a while after we became mates."

Sagepaw's heart jumps with twisted excitement. Finally, is this them?

But it isn't, not yet.

"Two kits, both she-kits again. I was overjoyed, but Snapstar wasn't. He took the kits, right in front of your mother. We didn't even get to name them."

Sagepaw's heart pricks with sadness for the three she-cats, and rage for his 'father.' How could a cat be so cruel? It doesn't seem real. Maybe it isn't. If this was the case, wouldn't Smoothpaw be taken before Sagepaw even knew of her existence?

"I don't believe you," Smoothpaw hisses, "Wouldn't I be gone? And I'm here, right here! And why wouldn't *anyone* see him take the kits? You're a liar!" Voidflicker's eyes harden once more.

"Oh really?" the tom spits, "I lied about this? He *did* try to kill you, *all* of you!" Surprise and shock runs through Sagepaw's body, making his eyes go wide. Voidflicker continues, louder and more threatening. "Sunset, when nobody would see it. He tried to take all of you, but Aloestar defended you. See that scratch on Snapstar's muzzle? Whose claws do you think hit Snapstar's muzzle that day?"

Silence washed over the den like a wave, and Sagepaw stumbles back. Because it makes sense.

If Voidflicker was his father, then Snapstar would look for any resemblance in his kits. They all had blue eyes, like Aloestar, except Sagepaw, who has bright green eyes like Snapstar. He looks just like Snapstar and Aloestar, nothing like Voidflicker. Wouldn't that make him the perfect kit, the perfect subject? Did Snapstar want to make

him an heir, or something more? A monster?

Just like him.

Flickerpaw growls at Voidflicker, stumbling back. "Why did you take us then? You're just as bad as Snapstar. He tried to take us from our mother, and Aloestar fought to make sure he couldn't. You're trying to take us from our mother, and she fought again. But you still took us. So how are *you* better?"

Voidflicker pauses, a smirk spreading across his face. "I won't kill you, that's how. You'll like it here, in Windclan. Promise."

With that, Voidflicker pivots and turns to leave. The den is left in an empty silence.

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a short n sweet chapter!! took me really only an hour to cook up sooo... told you i'd be fast!!

so what did you think of this chapter? I personally don't like it because WAY too much info is in here, but that could just be me being my biggest bully! thanks for reading, and have a good night/ day!
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Chapter 18-

Late-day is cold and alone. An apprentice greets them with a nod and a smile, like they've always been here. Sagepaw recognizes the pelt. It's Lilypaw, her beautiful blue eyes soft and almost sympathetic.

She brings them prey that night.

Her calico pelt is darkened by the lack of light, her orange looking a muted dark red. She holds a large hare, her teeth sunk into the thing like it might come alive and struggle away again.

"A hare," she says, dropping it at Sagepaw's paws, "I caught it myself." Is Sagepaw supposed to thank her? He only nods, pressing closer to shivering Smoothpaw.

"It's huge! I caught it so easy too," Lilypaw smiles, but Sagepaw can tell she's only trying to cheer them up.

"Sorry," Lilypaw sighs, licking her lips at the sight of the hare, "I know you guys don't wanna be here but... really it's good here. We have herbs and lots of prey and a *beautiful* camp. It's like, perfect!" Lilypaw smiles at this, before it fades again. "Of course...It'd be better with Tansypaw."

Sagepaw focuses on the dead hare and breathes deeply. "Go away," he growls lowly. Lilypaw lashes her tail.

"I'm only trying to help!" she exclaims with a kit-like huff, "I thought you might want to talk."

"Well we don't," Smoothpaw says simply, curling her tail around her body, "If you want to 'help' find us a way out." Lilypaw pauses to think, her tail flicking thoughtfully.

"If you want out, you'll have to make a run for it. I can distract the guards, but you'll have to do a lot more. There are guards at the entrance, and Voidflicker will be among them. He knows you're 'gonna try to escape, so he won't be distracted," Lilypaw nods to herself, spinning around, "Good luck!"

Sagepaw almost laughs. Good luck? Right. Good *luck*.

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Afternoon slips away, marking their first day in this prison. Sagepaw's teeth grind against each other, anxiety keeping him pacing from den wall to den wall.

"You stepped on my tail," Flickerpaw says blankly, moving his tail to rest atop his front paws, "Quit pacing." Sagepaw turns, anger boiling up instead of him.

"No. Can we go now?" Smoothpaw rolls her eyes at Sagepaw's comment.

"We don't have a plan. We can't make a run for it; Windclan cats are fast. Voidflicker will guard us like, forever. What else is there to do?"

She has a point.

"Well Thunderclan cats are...kinda good at climbing," Flickerpaw adds, giving his messy chest a quick lick, "We could try to climb the den, to get on top or something. And how good at fighting could Windclan be?"

"It's like one hundred to three. So yes, they might as well be phenomenal," Smoothpaw sighs in annoyance, flopping into the moss.

"And are *you* good at climbing?" Sagepaw asks Flickerpaw, who only turns his head away.
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"Sure I am."

Sagepaw sighs, sitting on his lashing tail. "I'm sick of this place," he growls to himself, claws unsheathing and sheathing again, "It's so gloomy." Flickerpaw rises to his legs, nudging Sagepaw towards the hare.

"Eat."

"It probably tastes like rot."

"Eat."

Sagepaw sighs in defeat, crouching down. His teeth hesitantly sink into flesh and fur, and then a bit of meat. The hare's stomach is huge, enough to feed all three of the apprentices, but Smoothpaw's already eaten and Flickerpaw puked up what he ate. Sagepaw slowly chews the bloody slab of meat.

It tastes bad.

Sagepaw swallows as much as he can before making a clearing in the moss with his paws to spit out the rest. Blood clings to his whiskers.

"Yeah, it's bad," Smoothpaw says, eyes fixed on the moss-covered entrance. Her mouth is smoothed into a line. Flickerpaw sits, shaking his head softly.

"I have an idea," he smirks, eyes suddenly brightening, "It's so...simple. We just scale the back wall. It's all made of branches and mud and it's super short. Actually, we could probably jump it!" The words are said in a whisper. Sagepaw pricks his ears, excitement welling in his chest.

"That's it, we have it," Sagepaw says, glaring at his sister, "Our 'plan.'"

"No we don't," Smoothpaw narrows her light blue eyes, "What if they see us? The plan is too broad. What do we do after we get out? Run? But Windclan is fast. They can't know we left for a while, however long it takes to get to the Thunderclan border sprinting, at

least."

"I...I went to Windclan with Snapstar when Windclan wasn't here. We weren't sprinting but... Windclan camp isn't far from our border."

"Good. Now which wall faces our border?" Smoothpaw asks, standing up. Sagepaw was outside. He should know this.

"Opposite to this den, where the entrance is," he answers, frowning, "Where the guards are."

"What if we went through the wall behind us," Flickerpaw says thoughtfully, "and looped around. They wouldn't expect that, and we could stay hidden."

"Okay." Smoothpaw smiles a kit-like grin, "Okay, fine. Plan, then."

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"Follow me."

Flickerpaw creeps from the den, paws light. The sounds of talking and sharing tongues have long since cut out, leaving an inky darkness behind. Night.

Sagepaw slinks after Flickerpaw, eyes darting around the camp. Unease seeps into his bones when he sees a few stray warriors lazily walking into their dens, jaws parted in yawns. He freezes, eyes wide, before Smoothpaw nudges him roughly.

"Go!" she says in a whisper.

Sagepaw nods a bit, creeping forward. Flickerpaw looks around, before his muscles bunch and he leaps.

Heads turn.

Oh no.

It seems his jump ignites chaos.
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"Run!" Smoothpaw's voice, shrill with fear but also determination, echoes through camp. Warriors stream out of their den as Smoothpaw easily leaps the wall. Sagepaw takes no time to look back before his lean body springs over the sticks and mud.

Sagepaw sprints over the moor, adrenaline fueling each step. The springy grass grazes his paw pads as he speeds, reminding him that he's not flying, even if it feels like it.

"Faster!" Flickerpaw's voice urges as he passes Sagepaw and Smoothpaw, "Hurry!"

The apprentices pick up their pace as they turn towards Thunderclan camp, sprinting. Sagepaw can feel the anger and determination in the air. Lilypaw didn't do her job well enough. The guards are not distracted.

Their silhouettes in the darkness appear in front of the apprentices, their eyes shining in the blanket of darkness. Sagepaw can imagine their grins as he and his littermates freeze.

"So much for a Plan B," Smoothpaw says, though her voice is not scared, only annoyed, "Come on, scaredy cats."

The she-cat veers left, into the darkness. Riverclan camp is this way. Smoothpaw streaks into the darkness. They follow hesitantly.

They run in zigzags, but the cats don't shake off like flies or bees do. They follow intently, drawing closer, closer. Sagepaw tries not to think about it.

The sharp, disgusting scent of Riverclan markings meet them. They'd be lucky to meet any patrol, with how dark it is. But it seems the universe has run out of luck. The scents of cats are stale, from early day, at least.

The apprentices shoot past the border like furry bullets, their pained and exhausted breaths raggedy and pathetic. The Windclan cats don't stop, like the three had expected. They trample across the line of scent just like the littermates had seconds ago.

The ground is still moor for a while longer, before it gives way to

more muddy terrain. Peat sticks stubbornly to the three's ankles. Where is the Riverclan camp?

Suddenly, the Windclan cats fall away like wilted leaves from a stem. They turn tails and run, shooting across Riverclan territory back the way they came. Laughing. Laughing?

"An amazing Plan B that was," Sagepaw gasps as the adrenaline from the chase fades, "Took us to Riverclan." Smoothpaw coughs and gasps, but her posture signals her alertness.

"I tried," she retorts curtly. Flickerpaw crouches to catch his breath.

"Hey, we're not in that prison anymore," he says.

"I think they'll be waiting for us if we try to leave here," Sagepaw coughs out, sitting and sucking in large gulps of oxygen. Smoothpaw does the same, pelt rippling in unease.

"Yeah," Flickerpaw agrees, sucking his last breath before breathing normally again, "or something to catch us. Anything, really."

"We should find Riverclan," Smoothpaw decides, climbing to her paws once more, "Like, now."

"No way!" Sagepaw rolls his eyes at the idea, wondering how his sister could be so mouse-brained, "They'd probably-"

"We're Aloestar's kits. And..." Smoothpaw trails off, her mouth curling into a frown, "Never mind."

"Fine," Sagepaw sighs in defeat, sitting again, "We'll go to Riverclan."

Chapter 19-

Riverclan camp looks crushed and sad.

The three apprentices travel over the tiny stream, and then stop at the wide, churning river. Their shadows cast over the water, their reflections staring up at them with worried eyes.

"How are we supposed to cross a stupid stream?" Smoothpaw huffs, frustrated. Her eyes wander to the camp right behind the barrier of the river.

It is barren, stale the dens lined with more or less dead reeds, and the arranged twigs and branches are clumsily thrown together. Sagepaw can see through the dens, seeing cats sleeping on the ground and only a few young-looking cats having a moss nest. The prey pile is pitifully small, the fish sitting in a muddy hole. Sagepaw almost feels bad for the cats, before a snarl sounds behind him. The apprentices whip their heads around, before they see a cat as small as them.

"Wavepaw!" Smoothpaw's mouth breaks into a frown as the snarl escapes her mouth, "Why are you up this late?"

Wavepaw steps back, eyes narrowed, and Smoothpaw quickly looks embarrassed and sits on her flicking. The Riverclan apprentice sits too, a stubborn look on her face. "I could ask you the same question. Why are *you* on *our* territory?"

Smoothpaw frowns deeper, and Sagepaw bares his teeth. "Well, you have to take us to Turtlesplash now," Sagepaw says mockingly, "Oh no."

"Hmm," Wavepaw offers a fake smile, "How about no." The she-cat's lip smooths into a line. "Maybe if you tell me why you're on Riverclan land, in the dark, and look like you've fought a pack of angry dogs."

"No." Flickerpaw hisses, turning tail to face the river. "I can swim."

"Flickerpaw-" Smoothpaw calls as Flickerpaw bunches his muscles, peering into the dark swirling water with determination.

"Don't do it," Wavepaw warns, standing with a twitching pelt. Sagepaw's eyes widen as Flickerpaw rolls his eyes, before springing into the air. Into the water. A splash sounds.

Wavepaw rushes towards the water as Flickerpaw bobs, gasping on the surface for air. And then he goes under. Time slows. Another splash sounds. It's Wavepaw, a blur of black on the grayish water. Flickerpaw's head goes under, his legs kicking vigorously.

But he can't seem to move at all, being dragged by the current, into the dark, cold, water...

Sagepaw feels a screech of worry escape from him. "Help!"

Wavepaw's shadow disappears underneath the water. Her head breaks surface seconds later, a few feet forward, and then again, she dives under.

"What's happening?" A Riverclan warrior explodes from camp, eyes shining with worry as they rest on the river, "Wavepaw?"

"Flickerpaw too," Smoothpaw gasps, looking distraught, "Help him!" The Riverclan warrior turns, calling behind his shoulder. And then she dives in.

So much movement ripples the water, but then there is less movement now. A black furred apprentice lies on the shore, Smoothpaw curled around her. Another Riverclan cat, a muscled tom, leaps the river. Was that an option? Why couldn't Flickerpaw think of that?

The tom presses Wavepaw's stomach with a paw, and she coughs watery vomit up. Sagepaw turns back to the water.

Flickerpaw's head goes under again. Seconds pass. Minutes. A tiny, mocking, voice pipes up in Sagepaw's head.
Tick...Tock...Tick...Tock...

Sagepaw blinks, narrowing his eyes against the sheet of darkness. No, there is nothing. No white pelt, no gasping jaws. The Riverclan warriors disappear under the waves and ripples, not coming up either.

Where is Flickerpaw?

Where are the warriors?

Sagepaw can't breathe.

Wavepaw breathes. She coughs, hiccups, eyes opening. "Lar...Larch...Larchleap?" Wavepaw smiles weakly, "Dad."

Sagepaw turns away again. It's almost gross. He can't stand it.

A Riverclan warrior climbs out of the river as the sky flashes with lightning, and then thunder. Rain drizzles down. "The river's current is too strong," she says gravely, "We can't swim anymore. That apprentice is dead."

Dead. Dead? Dead.

'Flickerpaw' and 'dead' shouldn't go in the same sentence.

"Dead?" Smoothpaw spits, rising to her paws, "What are you talking about? He can't be dead. Keep searching."

"We can't," the she-cat says blankly, "The river might flood, with the rain. It's too dangerous."

"But..." Sagepaw stammers over the sound of thunder, "But...but... Flickerpaw's my brother. You can't let him...pass." Images of Maplekit, eyes locking into his, flash in his mind. Like a flashback. Were...Were they blue? In his thoughts they are blue. The sharp, angry, piercing, blue eyes in Sagepaw's many dreams.

Are those eyes Maplekit's?

"Weedfrown's got him!" A light brown cat who blends in with the darkness grins, "He's got the apprentice!"

Sagepaw's heart fills with relief, and then worry, as Weedfrown hobbles onto the bank, dropping Flickerpaw half out and half in the water. Flickerpaw isn't breathing.

Cats rush forward, pushing on Flickerpaw's stomach frantically. Sagepaw is frozen, staring, hoping that Flickerpaw can mimic Wavepaw's recovery.

But he doesn't.

He chokes up a tiny amount of water. Nothing more. And suddenly, a medicine cat is there, urging Flickerpaw to listen, to cough. His sides are pressed in with quick paws. He musters one pained breath which silences the crowd, but talking resumes as Flickerpaw falls quiet again.

Smoothpaw collapses, tears covering her face. And suddenly Sagepaw is sobbing, loud, ugly sobs. Time is still slowed as Sagepaw's legs give out and he falls, falls, falls, like he did as a kit. But at least then Flickerpaw watched him fall with concern in his eyes and a kit-like voice. Sagepaw can almost remember his little call.

"Sagekit? Brother!"

So much fear and concern and care. But now Flickerpaw's face is a clean slate, his mouth open. Almost curled in pain.

"I need you," Smoothpaw cries, but that doesn't change anything. Death doesn't stop for the needy.

Or does it?

Flickerpaw breathes again, a big, wheezing cough. More water escapes. And then silence. And then another cough. And then real silence, dead silence.

So the question rises again, demanding an answer. As cats step over the two littermates who huddle together, one broken more than the other, Sagepaw shuts his eyes and wonders:

Is Flickerpaw dead?

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"have you ever had a dream that your favorite baby's drowning? and you grab him by his sweater sleeve, pull him up onto the ground. and you can hear the water slosh down inside his tiny gut. push his belly up and down but he can't cough the water up..."

Kimya Dawson, My Mom.

If you know you know ;)
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Chapter 20-

Flickerpaw's POV

Flickerpaw now knows his decision was wrong, as he splashes into ice cold water. He can swim, yes, but the current's cruel hands forces his paws to churn pointlessly. Soon, all he can do is sputter, head bobbing over water. The tom's paws flail, yanked under him. They no longer flap uselessly, but instead grapple at the shore. The dirt and sand crumble into the dark water.

Flickerpaw's head falls underneath the waves. The water squirms now his throat, slipping further, further. Flickerpaw's paws hit something hard, and he pushes up. His lungs, for only a tiny moment, are exposed to real oxygen. Only a moment. The current forces him under, and he sinks, black spotting his vision. He can't breathe.

Goodbye world!

But no, Flickerpaw breaks the surface again, for longer. His mouth opens, snagging a desperate gulp of air. It enlightens his lungs. He gasps, under swallow of air missing as he is snagged under again. "Help-"

Suddenly, the water is booming with sound. Splashes, of many cats entering the water. Flickerpaw sinks again, seeing a misty black paw in the dark blue water. And then it is yanked away, out of the water. Flickerpaw hopes the cat is okay.

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Flickerpaw only remembers his last thought, only the swirling water as black as tar and ichor mixed together, grabbing him, yanking him-
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His eyes open.

Too many cats, all staring at him, waiting for him.

Too many.

All with stars encrusted in their blue-stained pelts.

What is this?

Flickerpaw's thoughts tumble over each other, each fighting to be the one that comes out of his mouth. Is he dead? Is this Starclan? Did he drown or choke? Can he go back? Who are these cats?

"Am I dead?" Flickerpaw chokes, eyes widening. The ability to breathe freely feels amazing.

"Yes," One old-looking cat sits on his haunches, as if about to leap up again, the words said so simply from his jaws. But it doesn't feel simple.

"What...?" Flickerpaw blinks, processing, "I'm in..."

"No," The old tom says impatiently, "Look around, young blood. You are in a puddle of mud. Does this look like Starclan?"

"Quit snapping at him," A she-cat with her muzzle graying mews sharply, her gaze turning onto Flickerpaw once more, "I'm Mantisstar, and this is Funnelstar. He's always been snappy." Funnelstar glares at the she-cat right back.

"I'm in the Dark Forest?" Flickerpaw says, his chest panging with sadness, "But I-"

"There's a problem... in Starclan," Mantisstar says, eyes flashing with worry, "Were you ever taught about the battle between Starclan and the Dark Forest?" Flickerpaw nods hurriedly. Mantisstar dips her head. "We don't want it to happen again but... A dark presence are in the territories." Funnelstar nods, mouth frowning.

"Dark presence?" Flickerpaw questions, "like Snapstar? Or Voidflicker? Or like... old Tigerstar?"

"Yes," Funnelstar narrows his eyes, "In Thunderclan. A murderer, hiding behind a holy title. One that cannot be shaken. A path that cannot falter. The Dark Forest is corrupting his mind. He cannot be fixed. Only killed."

"I wish you the best," Mantisstar adds, eyes shimmering with worry, "to find him."

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Sagepaw's POV

Flickerpaw's eyes open.

They open, open, open, to a sea of cats holding their breaths. Sagepaw apart of them, face streaked with tiny streams of tears and rain. Flickerpaw coughs. Water gushes out.

"Mantisstar," Flickerpaw says almost clearly before coughing up mucus and water together, "Funnelstar?"

"We're here," Sagepaw purrs, though his heart still feels like it's about to burst into a bloody mess, "We're here."

Flickerpaw closes his eyes again, coughing up more and more water. Finally, bile comes out, and Diveflicker announces that he's done, and now should rest.

The night ends too.

Sagepaw and the rest of Riverclan are nudged back towards camp. Towards the river. A few lean she-cat leap first, promising to catch the apprentices if they fall into the swirling water. Sagepaw barely hears it. The tom freezes up, staring at the water, imagining Flickerpaw's white pelt and blank, dead, eyes. No. He can't jump.

"Take us home," Sagepaw demands in a small voice, "P-Please..."

"Flickerpaw needs to rest," Diveflicker's annoying voice pipes up, "He might run a fever."

"Tumblecry will deal with it," Smoothpaw answers for Sagepaw,
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making his pelt prick with annoyance, "We'll tell her *when* we get there."

"We'll leave alone," Sagepaw hisses, the threat tingling on his tongue, "If you don't let us go, that is. Diveflicker's face scrunches.

"Larchleap, Weedfrown, are you two willing to escort them over?" A she-cat speaks now, and Sagepaw blinks when he realizes he'd just snapped at Turtlesplash. But she had agreed. Is this really agreement, though?

"I don't kno-" Weedfrown starts, before Larchleap shoots him a rough glare.

"Yes, we would love to," the tom finishes, spinning to help support Flickerpaw. Weedfrown grimaces at Sagepaw.

"Come on."

The chaos of the night seems to end, life going quiet, as Sagepaw dips his head and hurries after Larchleap. Weedfrown stays far behind, grumbling and glaring.

The little group breaks from Riverclan, leaving it in the dark cloud of gloom and grief that once hung in the air.

It still feels strangling.

Flickerpaw stumbles forward, his face smooth and scared looking. Sagepaw narrows his eyes, seeing something there that isn't his brother. After death, is every cat broken? Every cat, burdened with a soul on their paws, hanging in their head, just like their sad, disturbed face. But a soul that left so long ago. That is the problem.

But who said life didn't exist beyond death? Starclan, the Dark Forest, what changes when you die? Not the world. Each squirrel, mouse, doesn't matter, but suddenly the world is off-set when a single cat dies? No, that doesn't make sense. Sagepaw's lip curls into a snarl. No life matters. It's death that does.

"You...okay?" Smoothpaw breathes, eyes trained on the swampy marsh ahead. Sagepaw blinks.

"Yeah, fine I guess."

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The travel is quiet and speedy. Flickerpaw is still coughing, eyes heavy, but he moves fast. He doesn't speak, but his eyes say many words. Terrified words. They dart around, his jaw clenching and un-clenching like the wind is a danger.

Sagepaw feels his pelt twitch as the destroyed Thunderclan camp comes into view. The bramble barrier is short, but sturdy. They'd pressed it all into shape the day Sagepaw had... left. Now they look stronger, and more welcoming.

A cat, small and thin looking, paces at the entrance. The she-cat's head is turned, the tufts behind her ears grabbed by wind and tossed around. She moves fast, like a chipmunk.

"M-mom?" Smoothpaw's voice is meek as she pauses for a moment. The she-cat's head turns, and her darkened face is painted with two blue dots. Wide blue dots.

Aloestar looks older, like she's aged years. But now the tired eyes brighten with each second. The she-cat bounces forward like an over-excited kit. Instantly, Sagepaw smells her fur as her head thrusts under his neck, her purrs vibrating through his whole body.

Sagepaw's mother does this to all of his littermates, murmuring 'hello's and 'thank you's. Through tears, they all greet her.

The Riverclan cats only get questions and a tiny 'thank you' from Aloestar, before she wheels them away. Sagepaw feels his heart beat like the vibration of Aloestar's purr.

The camp is empty and deserted, a waste land. Sagepaw feels better just seeing it, feeling the soft soil beneath his paw pads. Wind tears through his fur like a persistent tongue. The dens stand tall, finally looking done. Even the nursery. The memory feels haunting, so Sagepaw looks away.

"Here, to the leader's den," Aloestar nudges the apprentices to the rocky crevice that is the leader's den, "I had a nest for Snapstar. You
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all should fit."

Sagepaw doesn't argue that he isn't a kit anymore. He sure feels like one, one that's run off. Sagepaw wishes that was all it was.

The leader's den is warm and comforting. The moss looks so inviting, not lined with grouse feathers or rabbit pelts. Just moss. Just sleep. Sagepaw flops down into the green carpet.

His siblings drop with him, curling around each other with wide open eyes. Will any of them sleep tonight? Sagepaw is so exhausted yet...

"You don't have to tell me anything yet," Aloestar nods, eyes shining with worry once more, "Get some rest. Sleep well." Sleep well. Yeah right.

But maybe it's possible. Maybe. Sagepaw sinks into the spongy bedding. His eyelids feel heavy. They close...close...close...

Sleeping well is no longer a 'maybe.' It is a yes.

Chapter 21-

Sagepaw blinks his eyes open to warm sunlight breaking up his fragile dreams into reality. He is alive, and home. The word 'home' is well-rounded and feels nice in his head.

"Mom?"

The word too feels nice, but it isn't his voice that says it. It's Flickerpaw's wheezing voice, his eyes looking heavy and burdened. "Mama?"

Sagepaw rolls his eyes, surprised by his own annoyance. Can't his brother *ever* act his age?

A mouse lands in their direction, the warm-smelling blood making Sagepaw sit up. His sleepy confusion lifts and he blinks slowly at the form, his sister and not Aloestar. "Smoothpaw?"

"Yep," the she-cat looks serious and does not blink back, but instead flicks her tail toward Flickerpaw. "You. Out. Tumblecry needs you." Flickerpaw narrows his eyes and glares like a kit, but rises to his paws.

"Thanks for the prey," he mutters sarcastically, brushing past his sister.

Sagepaw rises to his paw with a yawn and a stretch, tail flicking. "Thank you," he says slowly, nudging the mouse towards Smoothpaw, "Wanna share?" Smoothpaw shakes her head quickly.

"Already ate. We need to talk." The she-cat's fur ripples uncomfortably. Sagepaw narrows his eyes in unease.

"Okay. Uh, shoot," the tom answers, offering a tiny smile.

Smoothpaw breathes. "Tell me all that you know. You've kept so

much from us, both me and Flickerpaw, and it's not fair that you know but we don't. So I want all of it. All of it."

Sagepaw feels accused, anger flaring in his chest. "I don't know anything more," Sagepaw hisses, "I was trying to protect you-"

"Don't give me that," Smoothpaw spits, looking eerily calm, "But fine. I'll ask questions. Why'd Snapstar pick you, out of all of us? I look just like him. Why you?"

"You're a she-cat," Sagepaw says, annoyed, "and I have green eyes. I don't look like Mom, like Flickerpaw. That's easy. Why was I supposed to tell you that?"

"Why didn't you tell us Dad- Snapstar died in the fire? We deserved to know." Smoothpaw looks angrier than before, her eyes flashing with confusion herself. Sagepaw only feels a tiny bit bad.

"I don't have to tell you that," the tom says stubbornly, sitting on his flicking tail, "It's my business."

I don't. It's my story to tell.

But those are just excuses. And they're not even good at excusing. They aren't even convincing Sagepaw. Much less Smoothpaw. Because he should tell them. He should've told them. But he didn't. Why? He doesn't even know. He was too broken to know, too confused.

And now Sagepaw knows why.

Because of the green eyes in his head, glaring at him. Because of the sharp voice, demanding him to just do better.

"I did it. Strong cats don't cry."

Snapstar, all those moments that his disapproving gaze cuts into joy, into fear, into life. The look he gave Sagepaw as he disappeared into the smoke, like it was all his fault. Like he had tried so hard, but still failed.

So is Sagepaw not strong?

No, because hiding beneath Snapstar's paws didn't make him unstoppable, and it won't. Just because he's Snapstar's son, or something like that, doesn't make him immortal.

And that hurts.

But imagine how Smoothpaw feels.

But no, he won't, because it hurts too much. Thinking isn't meant to hurt. Eyes aren't meant to cry. So he'll leave it alone for now, he won't speak. Because it hurts too much, and Smoothpaw's stupid if she wants to confront the memories that she doesn't even have.

"I don't want to talk to you anymore," Sagepaw breathes finally, leaning down to pick up his prey, "I'm not going to be accused. You don't know what happened. You won't understand if you didn't see."

Sagepaw presses past his sister, into the sunlight of morning. It seems, right now, even the sun frowns down on the tom's actions.

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Flickerpaw's POV

"What did Starclan tell you, exactly?" Tumblecry's voice is infinitely calm. Her eyes search her herb store.

"Um..." Flickerpaw hopes he'll forget, but he doesn't, "Um... a warning?" Tumblecry looks annoyed as she hooks a dock leaf and drops it into a pile with a bunch of other rounded leaves.

"Be specific. Of a cat or-"

"Yes," Flickerpaw says hesitantly, "A murderer, living under a holy title that can't be shaken?" The words come out as a question. "It's a he, I think they said. *He* can only be killed."

Tumblecry turns, whisking around with a thoughtful flick of her tail. Another herb drops into another pile. "Dark Forest tainted?"

Flickerpaw blinks. How had she known? "Uh, yeah. Guess so," the tom mumbles. Tumblecry blinks too, looking like she's decided
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what it means.

"It's Sagepaw," the medicine cat turns again, like her news didn't feel like a stab to the heart. Flickerpaw shakes his head slowly, gears turning inside of his head.

"No it isn't," the tom whispers under his breath, before repeating it in his head, "Sagepaw isn't a murderer. And what holy title? You're wrong." Tumblecry only shrugs, not facing Flickerpaw.

"Maybe," she answers calmly. *Plop.* Another leaf in another pile. Flickerpaw watches each leaf plop into each pile, knowing each name of each distinct-smelling herb. He'd only been a warrior's apprentice because of the fear of sounding weak to Snapstar. But now Snapstar's gone, and no one is here to judge him.

Plop. Another leaf falls. Was Flickerpaw assigned to the wrong pile?

"Hey, uh, one more thing," Flickerpaw nearly whispers, like he's telling a secret. It feels like it. "Can I be a medicine cat apprentice?"

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Sagepaw's POV

Sagepaw stands across from Smoothpaw, sunlight causing him to squint his eyes.

Two moons have passed since the fire, since Windclan, since *everything.* Now Sagepaw's ten moons old. Ten moons. Why has so much happened in two moons?

Sagepaw was reassigned to Cracklight, after Flickerpaw decided to become a medicine cat apprentice. The tom had simply come back to their den, to their nest, but not to sleep. To say goodbye, before he moved into the herb-smelling hole. Why would any cat want that?

But it was his choice, his choice what to do about his now-broken life. And part of Sagepaw wishes he still has that control. But he doesn't.
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So now he's standing across from Smoothpaw, the grass he can't control under his paws, the sun he can't control shining down, and his heart which he can't even seem to control pounding in his chest with all of the angry, bad thoughts.

But it's okay. He'll win and look fine, *happy*, even.

"Three...Two...One!" Cracklight's voice marks the beginning of the battle.

Sagepaw knows most cats circle for a moment, to make plans and think, but right now he can't control his mind, so he doesn't need to think.

He can tell Smoothpaw is surprised by her little gasp as his paws hit her nose. She stumbles, backward, and Sagepaw leaps. But she rolls away, back on her feet in a moment. Sagepaw is too, too quick, and Smoothpaw's paws slam down on nothing but dust. They are both too quick.

"Move faster, that front swipe was good, but *quicker!"* Cracklight's voice breaks through Sagepaw's annoyed huff. He wheels around, quick, quicker, to see Smoothpaw pouncing at him. The tom clumsily darts away, like a frightened squirrel. Cracklight's grunt of disappointment is enough to send red-hot rage pulsing through Sagepaw's blood.

The tom whisks around to face Smoothpaw, a real, authentic, snarl escaping his jaws. He pounces, quickly. She sidesteps, like he expects, though. He lands on his feet, turning to swipe a sheathed paw at Smoothpaw's muzzle.

Sheathed. Sheathed? No. Not sheathed. Oh no.

Smoothpaw has a cut on her nose, blood welling up, and her face twists with surprise and disgust. Disgust at Sagepaw.

The rage fades. The anger fizzles out. He can only stare at the cut, long but not very deep, and watch as Cracklight and Aloestar rush over.

"What were you *thinking?"* Cracklight asks, muzzle twisting in a

half-snarl, "I told you to keep your claws sheathed. What were you thinking?" The rage returns, mixed with a deep, prying, sadness.

"I wasn't thinking!" Sagepaw explodes, his voice rising, "You were... were yelling too loudly... I was going as quickly as possible! But you said go quicker, so I tried... I did, and look at where *that* got me!" The orange and white tom suddenly hates his coat; it's too close to Cracklight's all-orange pelt, and Snapstar's, and he can't stand that.

Aloestar turns to Sagepaw, her eyes a mix between angry and confused. "We need to talk. Now." Sagepaw only nods, feeling numb.

Smoothpaw says nothing as Aloestar leads the way into the trees. Or what remains of them. The moss has covered the forest floor, green and healthy, and a few shrubs have started to sprout. It looks green again, almost optimistic, but Sagepaw knows better. Prey is still scarce and squirrels are rare. Mice have finally started to return, hiding in the undergrowth.

Aloestar stops, a threatening look in her eyes. "What's going on?" she begins, eyes narrowed, "Ever since...Windclan...you've been so different. Angry, short-tempered. What did he say?" But she must know. Sagepaw looks up, trying to tell her through his eyes. But it doesn't work. She doesn't get it.

Sagepaw feels like he shrinks, like a wilted sage bush, taken by fire. "M-Mom," he whispers slowly, eyes focusing solely on his paws, "Snapstar's not my dad, is he?"

Chapter 22-

Aloestar's eyes flash with something, worry but... relief? Sagepaw waits, holding his breath, before letting it out slowly and Aloestar opens her mouth to speak.

"Is that what he told you?" the she-cat says, almost breathlessly, "Is that why he took you?" Sagepaw nods hesitantly.

"Yeah, I think so... but..." the tom trails off, "I want an explanation. From you." Aloestar has clearly expected this, as she sits, sighing.

"I joined the group because I was starving. Our old group was, but their pride was too strong. Snapstar let me in, defending me when the others said I wasn't welcome if I couldn't hunt. I was only Aloe back then, but then I was Aloefog.

"I liked Snapstar first. He was charming and...kind... but then I had a she-kit. Maplekit. She was tiny and precious. She got lost, or I thought so. Voidflicker came to me though, said he saw orange fur in Snapstar's claws," Aloestar sucks in a breath, which seems almost painful for her, "We found the body. Clawed and tattered. Snapstar was the first to blame rogues."

She isn't lying. Sagepaw can feel the pain in the atmosphere, Aloestar's eyes fogging with sadness.

"You already know the rest of the story, I'm guessing. Snapstar was mad I went to Voidflicker. He was mad I had she-kits. He killed them. I tried to fight, but Voidflicker fought harder. But his eye... Snapstar did that. And you three..." Aloestar's face pulls into a fake half-smile, "I fought harder. I did. I had to. Not again. I couldn't do that again. I couldn't grieve another loss. So I kept you. And look at you now... I didn't want you to know your father... or leader... was a monster."

Sagepaw blinks back tears. "Why did you leave Windclan?" he near whispers, eyes glimmering with the liquid. His lean form is one of the only things from Voidflicker, a strange thing in Thunderclan. But not too strange. Not strange enough to question. But now it is. When it's too late.

"To escape, to start over. When I was pregnant with you three. Snapstar followed, and didn't let Voidflicker come. He wanted 'his kits.' I was so scared for you all."

Sagepaw sags, relief and confusion mixed together. Confusion about what, he doesn't know. He's just confused, even if all of his questions have been answered. Sagepaw doesn't speak, instead he just watches as Aloestar blinks slowly before turning away back into the Sandy Hollow.

Where Smoothpaw glares at him from the sand.

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Darkness wraps the camp in peaceful silence. Well, almost. Sagepaw's ears are forced to remain pricked as Yewpaw blabbers.

"Our assessment was today! Me and Fallowpaw will be warriors tomorrow, and we'll be out of the den! Isn't it amazing?" The tom grins in the dark, looking to Smoothpaw for approval. She nods stiffly, offering a closed-lip smile.

"Cool. Good job."

Yewpaw deflates in disappointment, but only for a moment, before he springs up again. "Yeah, I bet I'll be Yewdeath, or Yewclaw!" Smoothpaw rolls her eyes with a tiny smirk.

"Yewdeath is stupid."

"Is not!"

"I bet you'll be Yewberry," Fallowpaw's quiet, almost weak-sounding voice pipes up. Sagepaw realizes the she-cat never really speaks, not at all. Except to Yewpaw.
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"That's a cool name," Yewpaw curls his tail fondly, smiling at the thought, "but too weak for me! I'll be Yewbite, or Yewsnap. Something like that." Fallowpaw rolls her eyes, twisting away to face the wall. Her jaws part in a yawn, and she curls around herself. Sagepaw wants to do the same.

"Well I want to be Smoothstep," Smoothpaw says, prodding Yewpaw to attention. The tom pricks his ears slightly, looking utterly drained again.

Sagepaw has been trying to find a way to talk to his sister all night, no, all *day*. Now is his chance!

"Yeah that's a cool name-" the tom starts, but Smoothpaw shoots him a sharp glance.

"'Cause I'm so balanced," Smoothpaw interrupts, still glaring. Then she tears her gaze off Yewpaw and Sagepaw. She turns towards the wall, like Fallowpaw had, yawning too. "Goodnight, *Fallowpaw*. Goodnight, *Yewpaw*." Sagepaw only rolls his eyes. He can't deal with this, not right now.

The two cats murmur their 'goodnight's and turn to yawn and shut their eyes. Sagepaw curls tightly around his small, lean, body, which he has since come to question. The tom closes his eyes, images of battle and a small, reddish-orange, kit, dead at Snapstar's paws, playing under his eyelids. No, Sagepaw won't sleep. Not soon.

The tom waits for the sleepy huffs of his den mates before tearing himself from the nest with a flick of his tail. He feels almost sick, nauseated. The screenshots of life behind his eyes, the awful images, make him want to vomit. Who'd kill a kit? Not the rogues Snapstar had claimed, clearly.

Sagepaw walks into the darkness, cautious of his paw steps. Somewhere, in the dark behind his eyelids, Voidflicker lives. Watching...ready to pounce at him. But no, no one is here. Just a dark, sad, and empty camp. That's almost worse for Sagepaw.

The orange and white tom swirls his paw in the dirt, watching the white be dyed a dirty brown. His claws come out, digging into the

soil, drawing a picture.

A little kit, tiny, oblivious, smiling, as two cats, one strong and muscled and one with an eye missing, fighting above her. She keeps smiling. Sagepaw smears the picture, sending it away in the night breeze. Maplekit didn't deserve this, or the two after her. In fact, Sagepaw doesn't deserve this either.

None of them do.

But how can Sagepaw change that? His claws all come unsheathed, digging into the dirt. Anger bubbles over, spilling onto the soil below. No, he can fix this.

Before the tom knows, his paws are moving, racing out of camp. Forward, Forward, into the trees. Undergrowth, newly sprouted moss, flies by as he runs, eyes narrowed and paws fueled by anger, pure rage. This had started with someone, someone. Sagepaw knows it isn't fair, it really isn't, but he doesn't care. How could he stand by, not fight?

Sagepaw pauses at the border, eyes narrowed against the breeze, which is turning to a harsh wind. It whips the apprentice's fur around, like he's a puppet on a string. Is he? It feels like it.

Now he stands, staring into the blanket of darkness surrounding the moor. The border is freshly marked, a warning tainting the scent of the wet-markings. Sagepaw remember passing it for the first time, four moons ago, but now it feels like a normal occurrence.

The anger squirms again, inside of the tom's stomach. That scent is technically apart of him, deep down, in his blood. Sagepaw's claws escape from their sheathes again, flexing in and out. Blood. In his blood. How much will be spilled tonight?

Voidflicker always patrols at night. Sagepaw knows this. He's seen him before. Hopefully no cat comes with him. Sagepaw will die before Voidflicker lives past tonight.

The tom sits impatiently, adrenaline pumping through his blood. His eyes dart around, searching for anything. But there is no black

outline, no one green eye. Only barren and charred trees and little sprouts of undergrowth.

Sagepaw fidgets with his paws, mind racing. No, it isn't fair. He might have hurt Tansypaw, might have hurt him badly, but that doesn't make him a murderer. This will. Forever, it will. So he can't do this. He can't kill an innocent cat. Well, mostly innocent. The cat that deserves to die is Snapstar, not Voidflicker.

It takes everything inside Sagepaw to turn away from the border and slowly take one, two, three, steps away. His head fights to look back, but if he does, his whole body will want to return, to wait for the tom. But he can't do that. So instead, his head stays trained forward.

"Long time, no see."

No it doesn't. His head swings around to look back, look into a single green eye. It flashes with anger, blinking once. "Looking for me?"

Voidflicker steps forward, his jaw set in anger. Sagepaw knows what will happen next. Teeth in his scruff, his legs dragged along moor, trapped in another den, with more guards and less freedom. Maybe he'll be deemed as a runaway, his family distraught... No. That won't happen this time.

Sagepaw will finish what he came to do.

The tom doesn't bother answering. It doesn't matter. Sagepaw's adrenaline and anger floods his mind, taking over.

The toms darts forward.

Sagepaw feels teeth snapping for his scruff, which was to be expected. He ducks, head coming up quickly to collide with Voidflicker's. The black tom stumbles back.

Sagepaw darts forward once more, teeth connecting with Voidflicker's shoulders. Easily, the black tom kicks Sagepaw off, sending him sprawling in the soil. Voidflicker steps forward quickly, but Sagepaw is smaller, quicker. He tears himself from the ground.

His teeth bare, grinding against each other.

Sagepaw can't be just here, waiting for another attack, living in fear. No. He won't run again. Ever again. Not from his own father, not from his own blood. He is stronger than Voidflicker in every way. He will protect himself, unlike Voidflicker did for him.

Sagepaw shoots forward, watching Voidflicker's eye widen. His claws come up, slamming down, and then sinking into skin and fur. Voidflicker looks surprised, or terrified, or both, as Sagepaw unhooks his claws from his throat. Red pours, streams, from the cut.

And it is over.

Voidflicker's life fades as he coughs, gasping for air. But the hole lets it all out. The blood stains the soil, stains Sagepaw's paws. But he doesn't care. Doesn't even feel sad. Or surprised. This was how this night was supposed to end.

So now Sagepaw sits, with blood on his paws, staring at the lifeless body of Voidflicker. Trying to feel guilty. But he can't. He just can't. Sagepaw almost laughs.

Now is he a murderer?

Chapter 23-

TW: vivid descriptions of a dead body!! it's okay to not read!

Sagepaw washes his paws in a stream, the water reflecting the pale-gray sky. Dawn colors sneak into the sky, rosy pink being the most prominent. Sagepaw watches red take over the water, spreading like disease through the ripples.

What has he done? Sagepaw blinks at the water, seeing only blood. His paws are no longer red, more a pinkish color, but still the white underneath hides. He killed a cat. Not just a cat. His father. But he deserved it. Unlike Tansypaw, he deserved it.

Sagepaw rinses his paws again, before lifting them out of the reddish water. The white color returns. White. The color of innocence, of purity. But tonight, his paws are the opposite.

Sagepaw needs to think. He needs to sleep. He needs the familiarity of his camp, because right now nothing makes total sense.

Sagepaw pulls himself from the shore, turning towards the dying trees. Only one sentence comes to mind as he surveys the dead-looking trees.

Each forest needs to burn before they can flourish.

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Sagepaw slips through the old, abandoned, Windclan camp in order
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to get to Thunderclan camp. His paw pads rejoice at the familiar dewy grass and squishy soil. The smell of Windclan, however, is disgusting, even if stale.

The sun rises from beneath the hill, sending the streaks of pink, purple, and orange, away. Now the sky looks darkish blue. Sagepaw connects the color to the cobalt blue of Smoothpaw's eyes.

The tom slips through the crack in the rock, the one he's now outgrown. His fur snags painfully on the jagged surface, but he squeezes through.

Thunderclan camp is alive with groggy cats, all hustling to one spot. Under the High Stone. Sagepaw is somewhat thankful for this, as the chaos of an early morning meeting is easy to join without being noticed. Sagepaw walks with the crowd, feigning a quick yawn and rapid blinking. It's not hard; he is actually tired, if not exhausted.

"Sagepaw, over here!"

Sagepaw veers around, turning towards the cat he knows the voice belongs to. Yewpaw's excited eyes lock with his as he bounds forward, tail fluff grabbed by wind. Maybe the rest of his tail is too, because it is shot up, curled at the tip.

Yewpaw reaches Sagepaw, his mouth curled into an up-turned arch. His tail whisks, before re-curling. "Morning!" his voice sounds like wind-chimes, "Today's the day! I'm so excited! Fallowpaw too, but you wouldn't know. Isn't that weird, that I'm twelve moons old? Wasn't I a kit just a few moons ago? But you wouldn't even imagine it, would you?"

Sagepaw is forced to smile and snicker, but each second he smiles makes him feel sick. "Yeah, I guess so. I wonder what your warrior name will be."

"Yeah, I know!" Yewpaw nods, pleased with Sagepaw's response, "Come on, I'm trying to hide from Cliffstoop." Oh, right. Cliffstoop is Yewpaw's mom.

"Yeah, she'll probably groom you until you look like a sleek river

rat," Sagepaw agrees, nodding, "This way, at the edge of the territory."

Sagepaw numbly guides Yewpaw along the edges of the camp, careful to make sure his pelt doesn't brush the brambles. His paws thrum rhythmically on the grass, muffled by the soft soil.

Finally, the two toms merge into the crowd. It feels small, tiny, even. Sagepaw is glad to be camouflaged.

Aloestar sits on the stone ledge, the place where Snapstar usually loomed over the crowd empty. But Aloestar smiles despite the circumstances, looking genuinely happy.

"Today marks the day of my favorite ceremony to call," the she-cat begins, blinking down at the crowd, "A warrior's ceremony." Yewpaw bounces with impatience next to Sagepaw. Aloestar smiles once more. "Yewpaw, please step forward."

"Wish me luck on the name!" Yewpaw grins, watching as the cats all concurrently take a step back to make the place Yewpaw will step visible.

Yewpaw bounces to the front of the crowd, purrs vibrating his whole body. His whole pelt twitches in anticipation. Sagepaw can't help but smile despite himself.

"I, Aloestar, leader of Thunderclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on Yewpaw. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in their turn," Aloestar purrs out the words, "Minnowrose, is Yewpaw ready to uphold his warrior duties." All heads turn to Minnowrose, who is a bit out of the crowd, smiling in pleasure.

"Very," she answers earnestly with a dip of her head. Yewpaw grins even wider than any kit could.

"Okay then," Aloestar laughs a little, "Yewpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Yewpaw grins and nods, "Of course!" A few laughs and chuckles

sound from the crowd, making Yewpaw deflates and licks his shoulder fur down in embarrassment. "I mean, I do." More laughs, including a tiny giggle from Sagepaw. But tiny. Barely there.

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Yewpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Yewmist. StarClan honors your enthusiasm and eagerness, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Thunderclan."

Cheers take over the camp, and every cat is swept up into the tidal wave of excitement. Sagepaw still feels sad, but just a little bit better. Clan life is good, familiar, and here no cat speaks about Voidflicker.

~~~

The ceremony is far from over, even when Fallowpaw is named Fallowshard. Since Sagepaw's abduction and the fire, ceremonies have been mostly forgotten about. There is a lot to catch up on. Patrols, pregnancies, and other things.

Most importantly, Ivykit, Whitekit, and Cleftkit are named Ivypaw, Whitepaw, and Cleftpaw. Aloestar says she regrets making them wait a full moon to be apprenticed, but Sagepaw doesn't. He has enjoyed the four full moons he'd had without having to deal with the three. When Sagepaw was apprenticed the three other kits had only been about two and a half moons old.

The clan cheers, all except Sagepaw. He doesn't bother. He isn't happy.

The clan ceremony goes by without any more exciting announcements. Fringestrike is apparently expecting kits, her belly not showing it yet. Orejump purrs proudly at the announcement, his mouth breaking into a grin of pure excitement. Ivypaw had been assigned to him. A mentor and a father. Lucky kits. They have a respectable father, a living father.

Sagepaw's good mood fades mostly as the excitement does too. His mind refocuses on the blood, both literal and physical, on his paws. Voidflicker's blood. His father's blood. And the body, just left to rot
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in the dust. Sagepaw checks himself briefly. There will be no fur in Voidflicker's claws. Only Thunderclan scent. And who'd guess an apprentice could do that to a full grown warrior?

And no apprentice could. Unless Voidflicker wasn't aiming to kill him back, and instead was trying to take him... but no cat should consider that.

Sagepaw will be okay, under the radar. For now, at least.

~~~

Flickerpaw's POV

Day bleeds into night, and night bleeds into the area between too late and too early. Flickerpaw curls into a ball in his nest which still doesn't quite feel his. He closes his eyes, his tail fitting perfectly over them. Sleep comes almost instantly, pinning him into the moss.

~~~

Flickerpaw wakes, his muscled tense and exhausted. He's been running for so long, his breaths labored and shallow. But now he stops, with the scent of rabbits and moor heather clinging to his pelt.

The Windclan border.

Flickerpaw steps forward, over it, because he doesn't need to abide by the rules here. The spindly trees above bend, as if pointing forward. And that's Flickerpaw goes, another step. And then another. And then a turn. And then two more steps. And then a gasp and silence. Dead silence.

Voidflicker is there, cooling, in the soil, sprawling out in a large puddle of blood mostly around his head. Flickerpaw steps forward because he isn't scared, just surprised.

No, he didn't hit his head. His neck is torn open like a plump piece of prey. His eyes are wide open, but lifeless nonetheless. Flickerpaw brushes his paw against the tom's leg, but quickly recoils. It is cold. Like river rocks. Why is it cold? Is the river of blood cold too?

Flickerpaw doesn't have time to figure this out as he is torn from the

dream with a few final words whispered into the tom's ears.

"Find him."

~~~

Flickerpaw wakes in the early light of dawn. Tumblecry is curled up across from him, tail curled around her nose.

Flickerpaw rises from his nest, blinking away the chill the body had left him with. Find him. Voidflicker? At the border? Flickerpaw blinks again, gears turning. His head hurts. He wants to sleep.

But he can't.

Flickerpaw yawns, slipping out of the medicine cat's den. He narrows his eyes against the sun.

The whole camp is bathed in a soft, ethereal glow. The dewy grass bends with the slight wind, as if pointing like the trees. Forward, forward, urging him to move. The sun seemingly comes up just for Flickerpaw, encouraging him in the way it makes the world come to life.

Flickerpaw instantly speeds up, tearing across the camp and making the distance tinier and tinier... the tom bursts out of camp and keeps going.

After what feels like hours and hours of running, Flickerpaw's nose wrinkles and he stops. The smell of Windclan is strong, overpoweringly so, but not as strong as the smell of blood and death.

Was...Was the dream really right?

Flickerpaw had hoped it was just a nightmare derived from stress. After all, Sagepaw *had* been giving him a hard time and being a medicine cat apprentice is tough. Herb names, poultices, injuries. But at least Flickerpaw likes it.

But now...
~~~

Flickerpaw isn't sure he can push through the cloud of disgust and death. He doesn't want to see a dead cat. But he has to, doesn't he? Why would Starclan - or whatever had sent the terrifying and confusing dream - send a dream telling Flickerpaw to find something if they didn't want him to find it?

Flickerpaw takes a step over the border, but there are rules here, unlike in the dream. His paws feel like heavy stones. But he moves them, one step. Two steps. Turn. Two more steps. And then a gasp and dead silence.

It was real, it all was. The dream, the death... Flickerpaw gags at the sight of the dead, stiff, body. Blood settles at the black tom's head and neck, but Flickerpaw already knows where the wound is. Flickerpaw can only see the body, dry and still. And his dead, glass, eye.

Flickerpaw takes one step forward. Who had attacked him? Not a dog or badger, no, because it's scent would be everywhere. It must've been a cat. A sick, sick, cat. Who'd kill him?

Flickerpaw steps forward, his paws brushing the deceased tom's hind leg. Instantly the tom recoils with a hiss, nose wrinkling and a feeling of dread washing over him. He shouldn't be here. What if he is blamed? No, an apprentice couldn't kill a well-trained warrior. Windclan should know that.

Flickerpaw is more shocked by something else, however. The scent is tiny, like it's trying to hide. And it's doing well, as the scent of blood, death, and Windclan overpowering it by a landslide. But, beneath both of those scents, is the scent of Thunderclan.

Chapter 24-

Flickerpaw feels numb as he makes his way back to Thunderclan. Well, not totally.

His mind races so fast it hurts, just like his paws. Flickerpaw can't think of anything but the smell of Thunderclan, smeared on Voidflicker's pelt. Someone he lives among killed Voidflicker. And he thinks he knows who.

Aloestar.

Maybe she'd resented him for his brother, or for not protecting her she-kits, or for taking Flickerpaw and his littermates. Whatever the reason, she had to be the one that did it. She was the only one with a motive.

But right now, some cat just needs to know. Flickerpaw shoots across the spongy moorland and then into the forest. And then into camp, panting, gasping for air, feeling his muscles begging to collapse.

The first cat Flickerpaw sees is Cracklight, his old mentor, who acknowledges Flickerpaw with a stiff nod. And the apprentice can't help himself. "Voidflicker is dead," he blurts in a tiny whisper, eyes wide and laden with fear.

Cracklight's expression changes as he processes. Anger, surprise, sadness, and then a neutral expression. He swallows his negative expressions and then shrugs. Flickerpaw feels only more distraught. Aren't they brothers? Shouldn't Cracklight care more? But the orange tom only looks bored. "I'll tell Aloestar," he says simply, but Flickerpaw has a feeling she already knows, "On our territory, or on Windclan?"

"Windclan," Flickerpaw chokes, blinking, "Wh-What... do we do?"

Cracklight simply blinks, tail wrapping supportively around Flickerpaw's shoulders, balancing him.

"It's not our problem. It's Windclan's," the tom says, eyes locking into Flickerpaw's, grounding him. Flickerpaw's mouth goes dry. No, he doesn't understand. It *is* Thunderclan's problem, so much so.

"But... he had...his neck-"

"It's okay," Cracklight breaks in, his voice kind but firm, "You'll be fine. Go back to your den." Flickerpaw can't; he thinks he'll vomit if he takes a single step unaided.

"Can you...tell...Aloestar that...he is dead?" Flickerpaw fights not to gag at the thought of the cooling, dead body, "She needs to-"

"Come on," Cracklight sighs, wrapping his tail around Flickerpaw's shoulders tighter. The two walk, Cracklight guiding a mostly confused and blank-eyed Flickerpaw. His mind races.

Flickerpaw's good father has been denied from him, and instead he was born at the paws of a murderer and a coward. He'd been raised on a lie, on many lies, but he'd always have Aloestar. Or will he? Was his good mother denied too? Is Aloestar a murderer? Flickerpaw can't comprehend, or more or less chooses not to. How could Aloestar be a murderer? It makes no sense. But who else would do it?

Flickerpaw reminds himself to breathe as the two cats duck under the rocky roof of the medicine cat's den. His breath is ragged and almost painful, interrupted by a whimper. Cracklight presses closer.

And in that moment, Flickerpaw feels it in the air. The grief, radiating off of both of the toms. They share it, walk through it together. Both of them, grieving for a tom they'd never known, a tom they'd equally abandoned, but were required to care for. Family. Forced love. Both curled into a ball of pain that is Flickerpaw.

What is his life?

Flickerpaw collapses into the oval of green, his nest, and shuts his

eyes tightly. He curls so tightly into a ball that his muscles hurt from the tension. He pushes his bones into each other, squeezing out the anger and sadness and dread and despair.

"What happened?" the white tom can hear Tumblecry ask before Cracklight whispers a response. Before Flickerpaw zones the two out and tries to focus on sleeping.

Surprisingly, sleep comes easily.

~~~

Sagepaw's POV

Sagepaw can't breathe as Aloestar speaks, her eyes hard and emotionless. The words are so, so, powerful, yet the clan reacts coldly and with growls and snarls. *"Voidflicker has been found dead. Cedarmist and Minnowrose reported that...Thunderclan scent was on his fur."*

Gasps and snarls.

"Are you accusing us, Aloestar? Saying we had something to do with it?" Grumpy Frigidcall hisses up at Aloestar, plumed tail lashing in the late-day breeze, "We're wasting time! It wasn't even on our territory!" Sagepaw only feels colder at the words. He'd predicted correctly. His scent was on Voidflicker's fur, but why didn't it smell distinctly like *him?*

Maybe because Sagepaw's scent was covered in Windclan scent or blood, or fear, or *something* other than his scent. But it works for him now. He's not a suspect, not yet, anyway.

"No, of course not," Aloestar says firmly but genuinely, "There is no reason to think Voidflicker was killed, except his neck wound. He had no fur in his claws, teeth. Nothing but a scent. And since one of our apprentices found him, that could be why there is a Thunderclan scent. Voidflicker might not have been murdered."

Mumbles of agreement sound among the crowd, along with nods. Yewmist nudges Sagepaw with his paw, prodding him in the gut. It's weird that the tom still hangs out with Sagepaw and
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Smoothpaw, even as a warrior. But, even if the apprentice will never admit it, Sagepaw likes his company. His enthusiasm and positivity is infectious, his goofy attitude is no less than amusing. Sagepaw thinks Smoothpaw is even starting to like him, even though she'd never say it, especially not to Sagepaw.

"Think he was, 'ya know, *murdered?"* Yewmist says in a low whisper. His tail flicks at the word, tingling with excitement. "That would be cool, wouldn't it?"

"Quit acting like a kit," Sagepaw snaps, tail curling around his paws, "Of course it wouldn't." Yewmist seems mildly surprised, before shrugging.

"Okay. To each their own," the yellow warrior says. Sagepaw sighs in annoyance. Fear crawls under his skin. Will anyone find out if it was him? Sagepaw tries to push the tenseness out of his features, hoping nobody will notice under his sleek pelt.

Nobody does.

Sagepaw stretches his legs, yawning a bit. Yewmist does the same, commenting on how yawns are contagious.

The meeting disbands as Aloestar leaps off of the rock, cats joining groups and some gathering behind Orejump, who leads the sunset patrol. His pelt is sleeked to his skin, his head raised and his mouth parted to let the scents roll over his tongue. Finally, the tom decides on something and shuts his jaw.

"Sagepaw, Cracklight, can you join us? Aloestar said to pick who I went with," Orejump beckons the Sagepaw with his tail, and suddenly Cracklight appears beside him. Sagepaw quickly prances forward, dipping his head. "Okay."

The cats on the patrol are Orejump, Fallowshard, Sagepaw, and Cracklight. Fallowshard flicks her tail in excitement, her lips flickering into a smile. *Right,* Sagepaw remembers, *her first patrol as a warrior. Yewmist already had his.*

But Fallowshard says nothing about it, only whispering a quiet

'ready.' Orejump nods with a knowing smile, and then he hops onto the slope that leads out of camp. The rest of the patrol follows.

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Sagepaw focuses, or tries to, at least, on the still mouse in front of him. It's grayish-brown pelt twitches as it nibbles gently on a seed held in its pinkish hands. Sagepaw twitches his nose, forcing his twitching tail to stay still.

And then he pounces.

The little mouse's neck snaps and blood coats Sagepaw's tongues. Voidflicker's blood. *No,* Sagepaw breathes to calm himself, *the mouse's. Not Voidflicker's.*

The mouse hangs from Sagepaw's jaws when he straightens up, looking directly at the bush he knows Cracklight crouches in. The tom emerges, smiling slightly. "Well done, Sagepaw. You're shaping up." Sagepaw nods gruffly, not in the mood to speak. But then again, he never is.

"Come on, we've caught enough for now," Cracklight flicks his tail with a dip of his head, "How much have you caught, now? A magpie and two mice?" Sagepaw nods again, relief fluttering in his chest. The prey is returning, and Thunderclan is no longer half-starved. And everything is normal.

Normal.

Sagepaw drops the mouse, letting it land in the sun-highlighted grass. "How much prey have you caught?" Cracklight flicks an ear at the question, looking mildly embarrassed.

"Only a plump thrush," he answers hesitantly, "It called a warning. Scared all the other prey away." Cracklight whisks around, tail flicking in reference to the large trees surrounding the clearing. "All the prey will be up there now. Or in burrows. We should find Fallowshard and Orejump."

"Okay," Sagepaw answers, trying to sound proud of himself. But really he is just relieved to seem normal, average. No cat will ever
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know what he did. That's what puts pride in his voice. He isn't guilty for Voidflicker. No, nothing like that. That's what makes him happy.

Sagepaw leans down, scooping up the mouse in his jaws. Blood again floods his mouth, but Sagepaw does not flinch at the taste. He didn't mean to kill Tansypaw. Voidflicker deserved his death. Blood, now, only means blood. Not Tansypaw's. Not Voidflicker's. Only blood.

Sagepaw follows behind Cracklight as he leads the apprentice out of the clearing, into the trees. The grass is springy and Sagepaw loves the feeling. Finally, the grass is regrowing, sprouting from the less-rich soil.

The scent of prey cuts out, their warm aroma drifting away. Cracklight was right, Sagepaw realizes, as he peers into the trees. Little birds hop from branch to branch, as if teasing the two cats. Squirrels peek at the cats nervously from the naked trees, claws pushed into the grayish bark. Sagepaw rolls his eyes.

The weight is lifted off his chest. He no longer worries. Who would connect him to the murder? Or will they even know he was murdered? No, they won't. Sagepaw feels light and airy, almost serene, as he breaks into another clearing, bigger this time.

He's seen this before; The Wide-eyed Oak.

Sagepaw has heard kit tales about this tree. That, before the clans arrived, Starclan cats would hide in the two gaping holes in the trees. Or a giant owl poked the bark with its talons, trying to grab a squirrel. But Sagepaw knew, even as a kit, that those stories were dumb. Why would Starclan cats hide? Why would a giant owl hunt a tiny squirrel? Why were there two stories, instead of just one true one?

Kit tales. Sagepaw blinks at the thought, almost snickering.

"What's up with you?" Cracklight blinks at Sagepaw, looking almost surprised. "Why are you giggling?" Sagepaw's smile widens just slightly. His tail flicks, curling at the end. *It isn't my fault. None of it*

is. I did the right thing. The right thing.

"Nothing," Sagepaw manages to stifle his purr just in time, "Just thinking."

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hi y'all!! new chapter finally!! I was reading crookedstar's promise so my writing might sound a little bit more warriors cats ish.

anyways, next chapter, should I do a big time skip to sagepaw's assessment? there is a LOT I want to pack in there. like maybe 20 chapters worth?? gosh, a lot! but if I go moon by moon i really might have a lot of filler chapters! so what would you guys prefer? lots of filler chapters or a big warriors chapter. granted i could put a lot of relationship building in the filler chapters, but it might be boring!!

have a good day/night and remember to breathe <:
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Chapter 25-

Flickerpaw's, (or Flick's ;>) POV

Bleak sunlight cuts into the den, shining blades against the dark herb-scented cave. Flickerpaw blinks his eyes open, before shutting them against the bright lines of light. *Too* bright.

Smoothpaw's pelt is instantly visible, her orange muted against the early-morning darkness and her blue eyes focused on nothing. She must be thinking. Thinking about Flickerpaw? Maybe, probably. But it doesn't matter, because when Flickerpaw is awake, he thinks of Voidflicker. And he doesn't want to. Not now, not ever. So the tom snuggles deeper into his nest, which he notices now has magpie feathers woven into the moss.

Smoothpaw's head raises, her eyes finding Flickerpaw's closing eyelids. Flickerpaw is glad that's all she sees, because beneath the slices of skin she will see reddened eyes from Flickerpaw sobbing, wailing in his sleep. So *many* dreams. All awful, horrid, dreams.

"Flickerpaw?" Smoothpaw's voice pries, interrupting Flickerpaw's whimper, "Are you awake?" Flickerpaw stills. He doesn't want to talk right now.

"Flickerpaw?" Smoothpaw tries again, frustration creeping into her voice, "Why won't you talk to me?"

Flickerpaw knows why. Smoothpaw doesn't deserve this. Both of her brothers have been broken beyond repair, her mother is possibly a murderer, and her father is dead. Well, one of them, at least. None of them deserve this, but Smoothpaw shouldn't have to comfort her brothers after every single death.

"I'm sorry," Flickerpaw grumbles, refusing to elaborate. His tail flicks over his nose, concealing his face.

Smoothpaw only sighs. "Okay," she says simply, "I brought you prey, in case you want to eat." Flickerpaw sinks deeper into his nest.

"No."

"Okay."

Flickerpaw sees through cracked eyes as Smoothpaw brightens. "Okay well, guess what! Big surprise in store for you!" Flickerpaw closes his eyes to see only blackness.

"What?"

"I have a little..." Smoothpaw lowers her voice in a few intervals, ending in a quiet whisper, "a little...*crush!"* The she-cat squeaks like a tiny kit as it sees camp for the first time. Her excitement is a stark contrast to the sad and downy atmosphere. "But you can't tell him!"

Flickerpaw raises his head, curiosity tingling in his stomach. "Who?" But the tom already knows. There is only one cat in their age group.

And then a realization dawns on Flickerpaw. What if...Smoothpaw was seeing a tom-cat from another clan?

But no, Smoothpaw knows that would be wrong. Uncertainty still pricks in Flickerpaw's stomach, though. Maybe...

"You guess," Smoothpaw smiles at getting Flickerpaw's attention, "okay?"

"Fine," Flickerpaw thinks a bit, before answering, "Yewmist." Smoothpaw's whole face breaks into a smile, her eyes darting to her paws. Something interesting must hide their. Flickerpaw doesn't bother to look, seeing Smoothpaw's pure embarrassment. It makes Flickerpaw feel a bit better, knowing that Smoothpaw is still loyal to her clan. And seeing her blushing. It *is* embarrassing for her.

"Why do you like Yewmist? He's two moons older," Flickerpaw flops back into his nest, interest fading, now that he has gotten his answer. Smoothpaw still smiles though, a hesitant but genuine little

smirk.

"Who *said* I like him?"

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Sagepaw's POV

Sagepaw steps into camp, his pelt basically glowing with Cracklight's praise. He holds about three mouse tails, while Fallowshard holds a thrush and Orejump holds a plump squirrel. Cracklight had purred about having too much prey to bring back, so they'd have to go back soon, with his mouth full with two mice.

Instantly Aloestar greets the four with a grin, and Sagepaw with a little purr. "My little hunter." Sagepaw beams with pride.

The four cats walk, Fallowshard smiling, Orejump bounding forward, and Cracklight curling his tail upward, toward the sky.

Sagepaw drops his mice onto the fresh-kill pile, the smells from the array of prey rising and drifting over his tongue. Sagepaw purrs at the scent, eyes darting over the prey pile.

"This is the most prey I've seen in moons," a soft voice says, awe edging in its tone. Orejump purrs loudly as he wheels around to see his mate, Fringestrike, a smile painting her lips. The she-cat trots forward, letting out a pleased purr as her cheek hits Orejump's.

"Nice catch, Sagepaw," Fringestrike smiles, nodding at the stout mouse Sagepaw had dropped at his paws.

"You can have it," Orejump says, pushing the mouse toward his mate, "Right, Sagepaw?" Why would Sagepaw deny a queen prey? Well, not quite a queen, but still. Sagepaw nods.

"I'm not fragile," the queen rolls her eyes, though her whiskers twitch in amusement, "I can get my own answer." Fringestrike frowns a bit at Orejump. "And prey."

Orejump shuffles his paws. "I wish you would just...take it easy," he says, looking a bit embarrassed. Fallowshard paws out a fat squirrel,
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glancing towards the elders' den. Her voice comes tiny but strong.

"She-cats aren't weak. We fight like tom-cats, we fight *battles.* Kits are the most natural thing in the world, no need to fuss. Calm *down*, Fringestrike is fine."

Orejump only looks a bit attacked, before frowning and deflating. "Sorry, it's just-"

"It's okay," Cracklight smiles at Orejump, "You'll be an amazing father." Sagepaw nods in agreement. He won't try to kill his kits, he's sure.

Sagepaw turns, leaving the other cats to chat and Fallowshard to walk into the elders' den. Or he tries, before Cracklight's voice cuts into Sagepaw's thoughts. "Sagepaw, we're going to the Sandy Hollow." Sagepaw sighs, realizing his joints ache from staying in a crouch for so long.

"No thanks," Sagepaw calls over his shoulder, stepping towards the apprentice's den. Cracklight's face crinkles into annoyance.

"Not a choice, come on," Sagepaw's mentor calls back. Sagepaw's feet plant where he is like the roots of an oak tree, his eyes tossing threats at Cracklight. *Make me.*

"Listen to your mentor, Sagepaw," Aloestar's commanding voice sounds from the edge of camp, where she sits, sharing tongues with Ferretsqueak. Right, they *are* sisters aren't they? Does Ferretsqueak know Sagepaw's father is Voidflicker? She must. Strange. Does Ivypaw, Whitepaw, and Cleftpaw know too? The thought makes Sagepaw's stomach flip.

"Yeah, listen to *mommy,"* Ivypaw purrs from the apprentice's dens' entrance. Whitepaw giggles, and Cleftpaw rolls his big kit-like eyes. Sagepaw's fur burns with anger.

"Shut up, I don't need advice from cats with kit-fur on their necks," Sagepaw hisses back. Ivypaw laughs cruelly.

"Stop fighting with kits, Sage*paw."*

Whitepaw laughs with a nod. "Yeah, do you like arguing with kits, *Sagepaw?"*

"Ha! You hate kits, don't you?" Cleftpaw adds.

"Forgot to add Sagepaw, birdbrain," Sagepaw mutters, adding louder, "And yes, I hate overgrown flea-pelts like you. So if you mean kits like you, yes."

"Hey, Sagepaw you outta be a kit yourself," Aloestar rises from her prey, her muzzle twisted into a disappointed frown, "Quit teasing, you three. We're clanmates, mouse-brains! Not enemies. So *quit* lashing your tails and apologize. And you, Sagepaw, need to *move* your paws over to Cracklight and stop acting like a stubborn sparrow. "

Sagepaw huffs, muttering an apology he's sure the three new apprentices can't hear, and drags his aching legs over to Cracklight. Sagepaw's mentor's eyes are crinkled with amusement. "You sure are entertaining." Sagepaw only growls in return.

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Sagepaw jumps, soaring into air, but only by a few inches. The tom lands, jolting forward, before settling on his shaky paws. "I'm tired," Sagepaw says pointedly, balancing himself, "Can we just keep going tomorrow?"

"No," Cracklight says thoughtfully, "You're not even close. An apprentice should know how to jump, especially one about to be a warrior." Sagepaw's mouth curls into a snarl.

"You didn't teach me!"

"Calm down, I will. I see the problem." Cracklight nods to himself, mumbling something. "Crouch, like you would to catch a mouse." Sagepaw complies, about to complain that the stance doesn't work for him. Cracklight darts forward, however, paws on his legs. He pushes them inward.

"Under you," Cracklight directs, and Sagepaw pushes his other paws under his chest ruff.
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"This feels better," Sagepaw comments, waggling his haunches. Cracklight clicks his tongue.

"Eyes up, you're looking at the ground."

"Right." Sagepaw pushes his gaze up off the ground, into the darkening navy-blue sky. He leaps, reaching, reaching, his paws darting through air. He lands clumsily, but sure he went further and higher than last time. He turns to his orange mentor with a grin. "Better?"

"Of course," Cracklight purrs in pleasure, "Good job." Sagepaw's tail curls.

"Okay, can we go home now?"

"Nope, one more. Maybe you just got lucky, ya know. Rode on the wind." Sagepaw frowns in disbelief.

"You *must* be joking," Sagepaw says. Sure, Cracklight is tough, but not mouse-brained. How could he be lucky on a jump?

"I am," Cracklight nods with a chuckle, "Let's go."

The toms break into a light run, mostly a quicker trot, pushing through the stands of nettle and long tree branches. The smell of forest is fresh and the crickets chirp in sync, creating a beautiful night song. Sagepaw hums along to the nightly lullaby.

The tom trots into camp, eyelids heavy with exhaustion. Cracklight splits to sit with Cliffstoop. Sagepaw is alone, left in the dark camp, with the sun fading behind the trees. The moon sits, all high and mighty, on its throne of wispy night clouds, its grin beaming light into the night sky.

Sagepaw blinks at the moon, looking down at his paws. His stomach is empty, grumbling in protest, but Sagepaw doesn't want to stay awake a second longer. He stumbles toward his nest, his yawns getting huge, when a bristling Smoothpaw stops in front of him.

Oh no.

"Tired from training?" Smoothpaw hisses quietly, "That's what you've been doing all day? Instead of checking on your own brother?"

Oh, that's what this is about.

Sagepaw lashes his tail, pelt pricking with guilt and embarrassment. "I was busy," he says feebly, but Smoothpaw's expression doesn't fade, "I mean...I meant to check on him, of course, but ya know... I don't like seeing my siblings sad."

"Think I liked seeing you sad when Tansypaw died? Or Flickerpaw when Blossomkit went? No, I didn't. But I didn't distract myself with training. I sat by you, by Flickerpaw, playing games, bringing you prey. I *talked* to you, but you? You abandon everything you love just to continue Snapstar's twisted legacy!" Sagepaw's throat closes up. He only blinks at his sister, surprised by her anger.

"I'm not sorry," the tom whispers angrily, "You're wrong. I want to help Flickerpaw, I do, but what can I do? I'll only-"

"Sit with him? Tell him stories? Be there to wake him up from his nightmares? I did that for you. But no, never again," Smoothpaw spits, louder this time, before wheeling around, "I'm sleeping in the medicine cat's den tonight."

Sagepaw sits there as all of his clanmates move around him, snuggling into nests and calling 'goodnight's. Sagepaw can't stand this. He flicks his tail. He did nothing wrong. Sagepaw yawns, stumbling into the apprentices' den.

When he's leader, no one will question him.

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uhh I guess thanks for reading!! and also, is this too long for a filler chapter, for future reference?? ok hope y'all liked it!!
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Chapter 26-

Sagepaw darts forward, determination burning in his paws. The leaf is easily crushed, before being pinned in Sagepaw's gleaming teeth. The tom straightens proudly, dropping the leaf and licking down his shoulder fluff. "I can catch more than a leaf," the tom says pointedly, "Let me catch a bird!"

"Just listen," Aloestar says from beside Sagepaw, pressing Smoothpaw's paws under her body. Sagepaw sighs, annoyed.

"Okay," Cracklight says loudly, "We'll see what you can do." Sagepaw brightens, his mouth tugging into a grin.

"Hunting birds?" he asks, bouncing to his paws. Cracklight nods.

"Hunting birds. I'm trying to get rid of your wobbly landing."

"I do *not* land wobbly," Sagepaw hisses defensively, claws unsheathing to tear at the grass, "I'm just...hesitant."

"Hesitant to land?" Smoothpaw deadpans, though her eyes stay focused on the sky. And then she jumps, soaring through the air, and then she finally lands deftly with a grin. Aloestar nods in approval. Sagepaw feels stabbing jealously.

"Let's go," Cracklight says softly, padding out of the clearing and into the soft grasses, just starting to re-grow. Sagepaw appreciates the springy green blades under his paws.

The toms trot for a while around the dilapidated-looking forest. Sagepaw huffs in frustration. The fire-stained trees hold no birds, no ruffled feathers, no caws or rounded eyes. Where will he hunts birds if there are no more trees? Fear grips Sagepaw's chest. Will Thunderclan have to leave because of the raging fire?

No, they'd caught a bird in the charred forest before. It'd be fine.

Sagepaw shakes off his worry, bouncing next to Cracklight. "Where are there birds?"

"There are a few near the stream, probably drinking. Come on, and hurry," Cracklight explains, padding forward. Sagepaw follows closely, thinking about pouncing on a fluttering, squawking bird. Feeling it's wings beat against his paws. It feels like triumph.

Cracklight discreetly slinks behind a bush, eyes focused on a little brown spot. A bird, a little yellow-ish seed in its beak, its wide glass eyes focused on nothing. Sagepaw falls into a crouch, a normal crouch, to creep steadily forward. "This one," the apprentice questions in a low whisper, "I catch this one?" Cracklight shoots him a look, shutting him up. And then he nods.

It starts.

Sagepaw creep forward, tail high and still. His belly fluff just barely scrapes the moss the sparse undergrowth. Sagepaw's paws shake with excitement and his tail only lets out the slightest tip, brushing the grass, before quickly re-taking its favored position.

When do I leap? Sagepaw glances at Cracklight, who gives him a microscopic nod, so tiny Sagepaw barely catches it. But a nod is a nod. Sagepaw turns back to the brown bird, waggling his haunches. His paws tuck under his body, settling into the dew-soaked grass and dirt.

And then he jumps. With a prick of pride, Sagepaw thinks maybe the bird will think he is one of them. Sagepaw soars like an eagle, watching from above as the bird freezes momentarily in shock. The tom lands square on the feathery animal, grinning as he feels the poor bird try to escape.

"Kill it! Don't let it suffer!" Cracklight calls from the bush. Sagepaw nods, but he lets the bird struggle for a second longer, feeling pride soak him. The tom leans down, snapping its neck with a tiny bite.

For some reason, feeling a body, a life, struggling under him, makes him feel so much better. Right now, he's superior. To every cat. He unsheathes his claws, sinking them into the bird, and then out. *I*

killed a cat. That makes me stronger.

"Good catch," Cracklight searches Sagepaw's gaze, and Sagepaw worries what he sees there, before his eyes drop to the bird, "Come on, though. We really came here to climb. But good, that energy's out." Sagepaw's tail drops.

"But you know I *suck* at climbing!"

"More reason to practice," Cracklight flicks his tail, blinking, "Come on, *now."*

Sagepaw is forced to comply, huffing and puffing like a stubborn kit as he trails after Cracklight once more.

Sagepaw barely notices when the two slip into the shadowy remains of a forest on Windclan territory. Or what should've been. Lately, Thunderclan and Riverclan have been pushing the rabbit-eater's borders. They'd been bouncing back hard, leaving wet-markings and sometimes, bundles of rabbit feces where the Thunderclan cats had set their markings. Sagepaw huffs in annoyance at the thought.

Finally, though, Windclan had let up and let Thunderclan claim the somewhat flourishing forest, which was alive with grasses and leafy trees. And most importantly, the forest was *big.*

The expansive spot of trees was dense, the trees close enough for squirrels to live but not quite big enough for wolves to deer to lurk and live. Sagepaw has never been in the forest for a while before, but it fills Sagepaw with a kind of peace he hadn't expected. The tom sinks his claws into soft soil with a purr.

"Okay, here," Cracklight calls after studying the trees for a long moment, "This one has paw-holds in the bark. It should be pretty easy, if you're not incompetent." The tom shoots a playful look to Sagepaw, who only half-smiles.

"Climb," Cracklight orders, and for once Sagepaw doesn't argue. The tom only lashes his tail, before leaping onto the bumpy bark.

At first, he seems to do a good job, though his paw pads ache from pressing into the bark. His hind paws scrabble on the bark, and

Sagepaw realizes his mistake too late. His claws aren't out.

The tom slides down quickly, his tail providing no balance like it does on land. Sagepaw falls from the tree, somehow landing on his paws, but just barely. Sagepaw huffs, wobbling for I moment.

Cracklight only watches him coldly, like he's surprised he couldn't climb such an easy tree. Sagepaw's fur pricks with shame, but also anger too. But still, the tom is just quiet.

"Again," Cracklight orders, "You almost had it."

"I'm *not* doing *that* again," Sagepaw says stubbornly, sitting on his flicking tail. Cracklight's lips pull into a frown.

"You are. If you want to pass your warrior assessment, that is." Sagepaw bristles. Is his mentor threatening him? *When I'm leader, you'll be nothing but a peasant. A rat. A-*

"Climb," Cracklight interrupts his thoughts. Sagepaw sighs, itching to refuse, but instead he tries again.

This time is much better, and he hops up the tree like a squirrel. His fore-paw reaches for a ledge in the bark, which he reaches, but his hind paws are left hanging. He can't go any further, not with his hind legs hanging uselessly below him. So Sagepaw drops, but at least it's willingly this time. The tom lands deftly on his paws, already glaring at Cracklight.

"Again."

Sagepaw doesn't have the energy to argue, so he only hops up again. He scales the rough bark, feeling himself going higher, higher. Sagepaw's mood brightens as his claws sink into a paw-hold. *Third time's the charm!*

Sagepaw hops from the trunk to a branch, sucking in a gulp of cold air. "I'm so high!" The tom rejoices, stretching each paw in turn. He feels like a king on his throne.

"Stop!" Cracklight calls, "hop to that tree; it's pretty close."

"No," Sagepaw answers blankly, sitting on the thick and sturdy branch, "I'm no squirrel."

"Too bad," Cracklight retorts, "Jump!" Sagepaw sighs, pelt pricking with annoyance. Why does his mentor never listen to him?

Sagepaw crouches down, fear stirring in his belly. What if he falls? What if he breaks his leg again? Sagepaw licks his lips in unease, but still flattens himself against the bark. Waggling his haunches, the tom prepares to leap.

And he does, but with his eyes narrowed and almost flinching away from the branch. It's a miracle that somehow he lands.

"Again!" Cracklight's voice sounds proud now, "I'll keep my eyes on you, just go! Wherever you want!" Excitement blocks out Sagepaw's adrenaline from the jump. Anywhere? Sagepaw wants to go somewhere cool, but where? Well, does it matter? He can just explore!

Sagepaw nods vigorously. "Okay!"

The tom hops to the closest tree's branch, a bouncing, not-so-thick branch. He almost wobbles and falls, but catches himself, tail popping out for balance. Sagepaw grins.

He does this for a while, going tree to tree, smiling and yelling down to Cracklight occasionally.

"Stop!" Cracklight calls finally, and Sagepaw glances down to see a grin painted on his face.

"You just crossed the whole forest without touching the ground."

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Flick's POV

Flickerpaw wakes to the sharp smell of death. A dead Voidflicker. Voidflicker is dying, a shadowy cat taking the form of Aloestar, standing over him and cackling.
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No...No...

But the scent isn't of death or blood. It's sharp, alright, but the sharpness of an herb, not blood or death.

"What herb?" A familiar voice pries.

What? Flickerpaw blinks his eyes open, though his head-fog does not leave, even with consciousness. "Wha-"

"You heard me," the voice, who Flickerpaw recognizes as Tumblecry, "Which herb is this?" A grayish-blue paw pushes a leafy herb forward.

It smells sharp and undesirable, with pointed and spiked leaves. Little dips separate the points into green sections. Flickerpaw doesn't quite know, but he must be missing something, so he blinks, the fog lifting a little.

Maybe burnet? The leaves look similar. But similar isn't going to cut it. What looks identical to the leaves? Flickerpaw doesn't know. It has to be burnet.

"Burnet," the tom says blankly, picturing his dark eye bags and sad, down-turned, lips. Tumblecry only shakes her head. "No. Guess again."

Flickerpaw sits up, stretching his tail weakly. His eyes focus on the leaves from above, and suddenly it is obvious. The leaves aren't wide and rotund like burnet leaves. They are much slimmer, skinny, like tiny green sticks. Flickerpaw sniffs the herb-laced air, instantly wrinkling his nose. Not burnet but maybe...

"Daisy leaves?" The tom guesses. Tumblecry nods dryly, muttering something that could have been a good job. Flickerpaw only nods back, wanting to sink back into a numb sleep. Maybe that'll even reapply the fog onto his brain. Because no fog means pain. And pain means nightmares. The fog is good. Amazing, even. Anything but nightmares.

"Okay, this one," Tumblecry pushes another, more rounded, leaf, to Flickerpaw's paws. Flickerpaw blinks. Is this a test?

This herb is easily dock leaves. The rounded yet barely wavy leaves give it away. "Dock," Flickerpaw says, earning another nod, but not a good job. Tumblecry must've known that was easy.

The two cycle through herbs, coltsfoot, yarrow, burdock, and chervil. Flickerpaw struggles, the fog not letting him think clearly. He gets all of the herbs wrong once before getting them right finally, or gives shrugs and 'I don't know's. Tumblecry looks increasingly disappointed, but understanding too.

"Okay," the she-cat says as Flickerpaw finally names all of the herbs, her eyes emotionless, "We're running low on a few herbs. Come on."

Flickerpaw pauses. Come on? He doesn't want to argue but...

By now, Flickerpaw is used to failing cats. Failing Smoothpaw. No cat usually tries anymore, not to get him out of bed. Most cats except he is broken, the strange, quiet, apprentice who's seen too much. They let him be broken, stay in his nest, let himself wither away. No cat had tried, like Tumblecry is now, to get him out of the den.

Perhaps that's why Flickerpaw moves his paws, walking for the first time in a while. Because no cat had really made an effort. And she had.

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Flickerpaw can feel the grass springing up from the mud beneath his paws. He appreciates the feeling of the grass pulling him to the world. Keeping him there.

The mud turns wetter, more liquid than dirt, and Flickerpaw looks up. The river approaches.

It looks like a thin line of water, it's fast moving water only spinning a leaf down stream. Flickerpaw's heart seizes with fear. *There is no way that tiny thing could take you...right?*

But still... Even with reasoning, Flickerpaw still freezes. Tumblecry leaps over the stream easily, her pelt ruffled. With the jump,
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Flickerpaw only feels ice cold water piercing his pelt and filling his mouth. Drowning, drowning. The word thrums in the tom's delicate ears, too loud.

"N-no..." Flickerpaw waves his head, hoping Tumblecry won't insist he cross, because he won't. He won't-

Tumblecry only shrugs. "Okay," she says simply, "What herb are we looking for here?" Flickerpaw nearly collapses with relief, and then panics, because he doesn't know.

"Um," the tom sputters, "I don't...know." Tumblecry's eyes don't rise from the mud.

"Coltsfoot."

"Oh," Flickerpaw says simply, "the...the roots?"

"Yeah, sure. The whole plant," Tumblecry answers, smiling as she tugs a plant from the soil.

Okay, easy. Find coltsfoot. Flickerpaw breathes in, and then exhales. That's okay. He knows what that looks like.

Flickerpaw sniffs the air to no avail, forced now to use his vision. He scans the river bed, only finding mud and water. Wait. Mud. Yellow mud? No, yellow flowers. Flickerpaw nearly smirks.

The tom trots over to the plant, and is greeted by a surprisingly pleasant scent. Maybe honey-like? Flickerpaw leans down and nips the plant, freeing it from the muddy puddle.

Flickerpaw turns around, his eyes meeting her's. Tumblecry smiles, raising her chin and revealing many bundles of the same plant. Flickerpaw's heart flashes with competitiveness. He's been beat, but not for long.

Flickerpaw looks around, more motivated, and by the time Tumblecry calls to Flickerpaw that they can be done, Flickerpaw has collected four stems. He feels brighter, and the tom wonders if that was Tumblecry's plan. *Well, whatever plan, it worked.*

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Flickerpaw's paws move to sort the dock leaves into their piles. His brain is still foggy, but the fog is less intense, and Tumblecry had told him to 'get up and do something useful.'

Flickerpaw remembers, as he sorts the herbs, the moments when he woke up. Sometimes minutes, sometime seconds. But he remembers one particularity clearly. Smoothpaw, telling him she liked Yewmist. Well, not really. She'd never *said* it, but it had been painfully obvious. Huh. Yewmist.

A deep worry for his sister spreads through Flickerpaw for a moment, blossoming into fear.

"Tumblecry," Flickerpaw calls weakly, pushing another leaf into another pile, "Aren't yew berries the same thing as death berries?"

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ughh a super long chapter! it was pretty hard to write sagepaw's part, believe it or not, so sorry for the sloppiness. at that point I felt like if I kept deleting the awful, descriptive parts, I'd never finish this chapter so I stuck with this awful one. sorry for that!!

but I do like flick's part sooo what do you think about tumblecry and her tough love? and of Cracklight? so that's all, again, sorry for the sloppy chapter!!

Chapter 27-

Sagepaw sits excitedly beside Cracklight, purrs swelling in his throat. The tom's tail quivers, going back and forth before stilling, and then starting up again. Cracklight steadies the tom's tail with a paw, whiskers twitching in amusement.

"Stay still, Sage*kit,"* Cracklight says, though he can't hide his purrs. Sagepaw huffs, trying to still his vibrating body. Excitement surges through him, and then nervousness. What if he says the wrong thing? Looks the wrong way? What is he supposed to do? Just walk up?

Without his tail to fidget with, Sagepaw turns to his paws and shuffles them. Aloestar smiles brightly. Her eyes lock with Sagepaw's, a goofy grin spreading quickly across the she-cat's slightly scarred face.

"Sagepaw and Smoothpaw have trained hard, and finally have completed their assessment. Starclan has given you new names to honor this achievement," Aloestar purrs, "Sagepaw, please step forward."

Sagepaw is shaking as Cracklight pushes him to his paws, and whispers in his ear. "Go on now." Sagepaw rises, shaky paws somehow managing to carry him to the front of the crowd. Aloestar is smiling, and Sagepaw is grinning, vibrating with excitement. *Get on with it! I'm ready.*

"I, Aloestar, leader of Thunderclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn," Aloestar purrs, "Sagepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Sagepaw can't believe it's even a question. Of course he will! Who

would say no? But somehow, Sagepaw's words don't really meet his lips. He has to nod before the words finally squeeze out, all squeaky and high. "Y-Yes."

"Then," Aloestar smiles triumphantly, "From this day on you will be known as Sagesong. You are honored for your determination and decisiveness."

Sagesong doesn't like his new name, not at all; it's too fluffy, too calm, not like him at all. But as the clan's wave of cheers call his new title he doesn't mind it so much. Instead, the tom puffs out his chest and basks in the praise, and like sunshine, it sinks in in great amounts.

Sagesong scampers off, sadly out of the spotlight, as Aloestar calls for Smoothpaw to step up. Her eyes glisten with something unreadable, but it might be excitement or pride. Either way, her paws can't stop moving either. Sagesong waits patiently for her name to be called, and after a bit, Aloestar's lips push out the word, 'Smoothpearl.'

Smoothpearl giggles like a kit and does a little hop, smiling like the whole name is a joke. She spins, tail raised in the air, chin high, daring for anyone to challenge her.

No cat does.

Sagesong turns, hiding the tiny smile on his face. His eyes scan the crowd for Cracklight, but the orange tom has disappeared into the massive wave of cats. There are too many voices to pick them all out, but all of them hold 'congratulations' and 'good job.' Where did Cracklight go, or even Smoothpearl? Both of them have blended into the quilt of pelts.

"Good job up there," A squeaky, mocking, voice calls from below Sagesong. A pain lights the tom's ankle, and Sagesong lifts his hind paw. Little Whitepaw grins up at him.

"I needed to know if it tasted as bad as it smelled," he explains with an innocent look, before spitting out a bundle of white fur and turning to his siblings, "It does." Sagesong fumes, itching to leap at

the white tom. He's only a little bigger, and if he only uses a single claw it might be minor, he could get away with it. But no, he's a warrior now. They're basically kits. He can't get payback, sadly.

"Sorry, Sagesong," A meek voice calls from behind the apprentices, who scatter at the sight of Ferretsqueak, giggling like kits, "I can never get them to stop doing...well anything." The she-cat voice is soft and docile, her eyes giving Sagesong her pain. Sagesong opens his mouth, to ask something, anything, but the she-cat wheels around too quickly. She doesn't want to talk about it.

The rest of the 'congratulations' feel wrong.

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Flick's POV

Flickerpaw blinks his eyes open as a paw steps purposely on his tail. The tom recoils with a hiss.

"What are you staring for?" Tumblecry says pointedly, before turning back to Fringestrike. The pregnant she-cat laughs awkwardly. Flickerpaw looks away, into the pure black blanket of night. Why isn't he a warrior yet? Was it a mistake to become a medicine cat? Flickerpaw can't decide, but right now it seems it was the wrong decision.

The lean forms of Smoothpearl and Sagesong move slowly out towards the camp entrance. Flickerpaw almost laughs. He can imagine their faces, grumpy and regretful.

"Quit. *Staring."*

Tumblecry must look twice as grumpy. Flickerpaw gingerly tears his gaze away from his littermates. Tumblecry isn't grumpy. She looks more annoyed, and turns back to Fringestrike. "Look," she orders, paw on Fringestrike's stomach, "Put your paw here." Flickerpaw doesn't want to. He wants to feel pitiful for himself, to look out and dream of being something more than an apprentice. But he can't. Instead he puts his paw on the she-cats stomach, right where Tumblecry's had been.
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The little bulge of a kit instantly sticks out to Flickerpaw. A little kick presses on the tom's paw, surprising him. Fringestrike smiles blissfully. Tumblecry looks pleased, and Flickerpaw raises his paw off the she-cat's large stomach.

"I hope I have two kits," Fringestrike rises to her paws, yawning, "One she-kit, one tom. I don't want more kits than I have front paws!" Tumblecry nods.

"Your kits will come soon," she says, "and that might not happen." Fringestrike offers a nervous smile, dipping her head. Flickerpaw almost rolls his eyes. He didn't think the she-cat could be so anxious.

"I know," Fringestrike says softly, grinning up at Tumblecry, "As long as they're healthy I'm happy." Flickerpaw notices his tiny smile is sad as he thinks about his birth. Did Aloestar hope they all were toms? Was she sad when Smoothpearl was born? The questions pull his smile into a frown, and then a neutral expression.

As Fringestrike waddles into the comforting blanket of night, Flickerpaw allows his eyes to find his brother and sister, who stand rigidly next to the camp entrance and dirt place. Sagesong's tail flicks back and forth in clear annoyance. Flickerpaw almost laughs as he turns around.

Vigil is the part of being a warrior Flickerpaw will never be jealous of.

~~~

Light floods the spacious medicine cats' den as Flickerpaw wakes, mouth expanding in a wide yawn. Tumblecry's long, thin, shadow casts over the stone, and Flickerpaw blinks his eyes open to see the she-cat pacing nervously.

"What...What's wrong?" Flickerpaw yawns again, trying to force his sleepy, droopy, body up. Tumblecry pauses, as if she'd just noticed he was there. She blinks at the tom quickly.

"I've seen Mantisstar and Funnelstar," she says blankly, "Standing
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over a white she-cat. With a crooked paw. Dead, rotting. They were mouthing something... 'be careful' I suppose?" The she-cat stops pacing, but her eyes are still panicked. She blinks it away again, and instead locks eyes with Flickerpaw.

"Dead," Flickerpaw repeats, fear sinking in as he leaps to his paws, "Is...Is..." The tom breathes, but the breath is shaky and barely reaches his lungs. His voice slides out in a whisper. "Is... Is Aloestar dead?"

"No," Tumblecry shakes her head, "She's fine. Now, it could be any dead white cat there in the soil. White symbolizes peace. The death of peace. But it could be Aloestar. What do you think?"

What does Flickerpaw think? Flickerpaw doesn't know what to think, so instead he says, "The death of Aloestar is the death of peace. Sagesong will be the leader then." Tumblecry looks at Flickerpaw for a long moment.

"Do you have no trust in your family?" Tumblecry asks Flickerpaw, eyebrows raised, "You look scared to talk to Aloestar, you only give Cracklight a glance, and you ignore your cousins. And of course, you treat Sagesong like an overgrown kit." Flickerpaw looks down with a tiny growl, because she is right.

Flickerpaw doesn't answer, paws shifting uncomfortably. His mind searches for words, but all he can see is Voidflicker's dead body, glass eyes staring up at the morning sky. Before the tom can stop himself, he blurts out, "I think I know something." Tumblecry pricks her ears, looking intrigued. Flickerpaw feels his pelt burn. "Some cat killed Voidflicker and...and...I thought it was Aloestar." Tumblecry looks surprised, and then a little confused. Her mouth opens, then shuts thoughtfully. Finally, it opens again after a long few moments.

"No, Flickerpaw, she didn't," the she-cat says, "The night before you ran off to chase your nightmares, Aloestar came in here just to fret about you. You becoming a medicine cat worried her, and she might still be worried, who knows? But it couldn't be her. Aloestar was fussing all night about her kits, almost until daylight, before you woke." Tumblecry's eyes find Flickerpaw's, and she breathes shakily.

"It *couldn't* have been her."

Chapter 28-

Sagesong wakes as a grayish-blue shadow tickles his eyes and forces them open. Instantly, light invades Sagesong's eyes, breaking up whatever was left of the tom's fragile dreams. The sound of morning bird chatter fills the air, peacefully spreading across the land like the wildfire once had. However, it's different now. The wildfire feels far away, and so does being an apprentice. The bird's morning chirps remind Sagesong of his new name, marking his time as a warrior.

It takes a while for Sagesong to finally work up the strength to yank himself from his nest. The den is silent, too quiet, most of the nests empty and smelling of sleep and fur. The only cat still sleeping is Frigidcall, curled up and snoring heavily.

Sagesong feels humiliated. *Someone should have woken me.* That isn't very true, but Sagesong wants it to be, so it is. Sagesong parts his mouth in another wide yawn. Well anyway, he isn't going to be the last one out. The tom stretches his paws and licks his messy shoulder fur down.

The camp is too loud as Sagesong waltzes out of the warriors' den. The tom's claws flex as he narrows his eyes against the seering morning glow.

"Sleep okay?" a familiar voice asks, and Sagesong's blood boils. Again? How many times did the apprentices have to mock him a day?

"No, I bet he didn't," the little voice, Ivypaw, answers herself, "You probably stunk up the whole den." Sagesong wrinkles his nose in disgust at the apprentices.

"You're as annoying as a burr," the tom mumbles, then says just loud enough for the apprentice to hear, "Too bad you won't be quiet like one." Ivypaw only giggles in what sounds like pure glee.

Sagesong almost slashes the apprentice.

"Well, at least I have my siblings," the black and white she-cat says in a snarky voice, "Little white went all crazy, and it seems now you and Smooth-brained hate each other. Why is that? Too wimpy to face your mistakes or-" Sagesong should've clawed her.

"Not clawing you as a kit is the only mistake I've made," Sagesong leans down, whispering his thoughts into the apprentice's ears. Ivypaw only hops back with a little startled growl, claws out.

Sagesong straightens up, anger bubbling in his stomach as the tom quickly trots away. Cedarmist stands at camp entrance, chuckling at Smoothpearl's large yawn. "Sleep well?" Sagesong is reminded of his own exhaustion, his paws heavy and dragging across the sand.

"Morning!" Cedarmist purrs, sounding chipper, "Your first patrol as a warrior! Excited?" Sagesong nods with a tiny smile.

"I mean," he yawns a bit, "sure...but not right now? Maybe the midday patrol though? I'm tired." Smoothpearl casts Sagesong a dirty look, rolling her blue eyes. Sagesong glowers at the she-cat. Cedarmist chuckles awkwardly.

"Okay," the tom says slowly, "Sure, sure. I'd be sleepy too." Sagesong nods tensely.

"Thanks for the offer, though."

"Of course!"

Sagesong turns, his pelt bristling. His back fur is puffy, his tail lashing, and his head pounding with sad thoughts.

Sagesong walks weakly to the fresh kill pile, swelling with prey. The tom smiles in relief. New leaf has treated them well so far. Sagesong quickly picks out a fat vole, scooping out the brown scrap with his paw. Flickerpaw would like this. And suddenly an idea comes to Sagesong.

The tom pierces the vole's soft flesh with his teeth, eyes finding the medicine cats' den. Sagesong shakes his pelt free of loose moss

before confidently making his way towards the den. The orange and white tom ducks, letting his lean form squeeze into the dimly lit den.

Flickerpaw sits inside, silently sorting herbs. Tumblecry stares at her paws, zoned out. Sagesong is almost startled by the lifeless-looking cats. Tumblecry shakes her grayish head and looks up with a small smile. "Morning, Sagesong. How was the vigil?"

"Barely got any sleep," the tom mutters through fur, before directing his attention to Flickerpaw, "Hey, Flickerpaw? Got time to share prey?"

"No," Flickerpaw answers after a few moments, turning to Sagesong with a far-away look. Sagesong feels a little confused. Does the tom really remember? Is he angry?

"Look, I'm...uh..." Sagesong searches for words, but only one is truly needed, "sorry. Sorry for not visiting while you were..." The tom trails off, the memories of Sagesong cleaning off his white paws in the river, red swirling away in the water, coming back.

Flickerpaw hooks a leaf with his claw almost aggressively, passing it to Tumblecry, who queries on which it is. Flickerpaw clearly answers wrong, judging by her disappointed frown.

"You didn't visit? I don't....I don't remember."

"Oh well-"

"You need to leave Sagesong. I don't want to see you," Flickerpaw interrupts, "I'm not hungry. Take your vole."

"Oh...Um. Okay," Sagesong feels defeated. Smoothpearl was wrong. She'd ruined everything. Flickerpaw hadn't even noticed. It hadn't hurt him. But now it does. Anger surges through the tom, and Sagesong rips his claws through the soil.

"Oh, so now you care?" The tom hisses at Flickerpaw, "When you are told to? You pathetic scrap. When I'm leader you won't even *matter*. You're lucky I'm even talking to you! Shut up. I was trying to be nice, you dumb dung-eater!"

Flickerpaw turns back toward Sagesong, his eyes blazing. But not with hurt. With anger. Sagesong almost stumbles back at the tom's rage. His eyes seem to hold all of the tom's bad memories, put together into a scorching ball of fury.

"I have every right to be angry," Flickerpaw says, his voice almost calm, which is confusing, given his expression, "I have you as my brother, after all." Sagesong fumes at that, but Flickerpaw goes on. "And this isn't what I'm angry about."

"Then what is it about!" Sagesong's voice rises, threatening to turn into yelling soon. Tumblecry glares at the tom's tone.

"You two better leave if you wish to fight like this," the she-cat announces authoritatively, "I don't want to hear it." Sagesong lets out a growl, glancing pointedly at Flickerpaw. Flickerpaw wheels around, flicking his tail at Sagesong.

"Leave now, Sagesong. No one wishes to see you."

"Fine," Sagesong hisses, turning too. *Be that way then.*

~~~

Flickerpaw feels anger burning under his paws, and a kind of confusion. Why didn't Sagesong want to visit him? Did he look that sad, that pathetic? Why did Smoothpearl visit? She shouldn't have.

"Good choice," Tumblecry says.

"What?" Flickerpaw knows what she meant, but he asks anyway, feeling awkward.

"I'm glad you didn't fight with Sagesong," Tumblecry elaborates, shrugging, pushing a burnet leaf forward, "Which herb is this?" Flickerpaw ignores her question.

"Too bad. He was probably just hurt," Flickerpaw sighs, "No cat seems to be talking with him lately. Except Yewmist." Tumblecry simply nods.

"Let's change the subject," she says jokingly, but neither of them
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laugh. Flickerpaw agrees with a tiny nod.

"When will Fringestrike have her kits?" he asks, "I'm sick of sorting and gathering herbs all day."

"Soon," Tumblecry assures the tom, "Kits will come when they want to." Flick nods. They will. Flickerpaw tries to brush off Sagesong's words and focus on another question clawing in his head.

"Did you...Were you...there when I was born?" Flickerpaw asks, eyes coming up from his herbs. Tumblecry meets his gaze with a smile. She nods.

"I knew you'd be great," the she-cat purrs fondly, "When you were born, the sky cried it's loses." Flickerpaw shuffles his paws uncomfortably.

"It rained?"

"It *stormed*."

"Oh."

Tumblecry smiles, and then goes back to sorting quickly. The den is left in silence once more, but Flickerpaw has more questions. "Was anyone else there?" Tumblecry's lips smooth into a frown.

"Ferretsqueak, your aunt," the she-cat hummed. "And all of Starclan. My mentor swore you were dead. I thought so too. But you mewled, so quietly, and...you got better." Flickerpaw smiles at this. The tom's chest almost swells with pride. He lived. He got better.

"Done interrogating me now?" Tumblecry asks, whiskers twitching fondly. Flickerpaw barely smiles as he nods. Tumblecry flicks her plumed tail.

"Then go check on Fringestrike."

Chapter 29-

The bluish-black darkness of night spreads over the land, pressing the warriors into their darkened den. Sagesong yawns, mouth stretching into a circle and then going back down.

Smoothpearl passes by, chatting with Yewmist and Fallowshard, smiling wide. Her eyes catch Sagesong's, full of glee, and then back to Fallowshard, who whispers her response. Smoothpearl giggles like a kit, her tail rippling with happiness. Sagesong feels a rough pang in his chest. Had the she-cat ever been that happy with him before? No, the answer is no.

Sagesong tries to ignore it as he flops into his nest, his brain heavy but his eyelids even heavier. It isn't hard to slip into a deep sleep.

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Sagesong wakes to the scent of rot clinging to his fur, and the reddish brown mud sticking to his pelt. The tom's heart fills with confusion as his head comes up, searching the landscape.

A few spindly, leafless trees stand rigidly, bending and swaying in the slight wind. Mud and dirt coats the ground in a slick brown paint. Sagesong rises from his muddy-red puddle, shaking his pelt and giving himself a few couple licks to get the streaming mud from his pelt. The smell of rot stays.

Sagesong blinks. Is this the Dark Forest or Starclan? After all, there is mud in Starclan, right? And Sagesong feels no dread. He'd feel dread if he was in the Dark Forest. So no, this couldn't be it. Plus, it didn't look threatening. No bones, no blood. And there's no prey in the Dark Forest. Sagesong smells the aroma off mice. No, this can't be the Dark Forest.

"Greetings, Sagesong," a innocent-sounding voice hums. It sounds almost like Ivypaw's voice, no, like Ferretsqueak's, but it isn't either
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of them. They aren't here. Sagesong wheels around, fur standing on edge. A tattered-looking grey and white tabby smiles from behind the tom, purring with a curled tail-tip.

"Who are you?" Sagesong spits, his back fur bristling, confusion and anger seeping through him. Quickly, however, he flattens the fluff flying up. *This could be a Starclan cat.* Sagesong subconsciously fidgets with his paws. *Hopefully.*

"I'm Lacewing," the she-cat purrs, and before Sagesong can interrupt she goes on, "Sagesong, correct? I said it right? Good." The she-cat whisks her tail, hopping in excitement. "I was your age when I died. My death was unfair, slaughtered for self defense. Do you agree that is unfair?"

Sagesong doesn't know; he needs more context. The tom only nods.

"Good," Lacewing hisses, before smiling again, as if nothing had happened, "We are the same, Sagesong. That's why I'm here. Because your life was unfair, and so was mine. I wasn't born in the clan I was raised in. And you weren't either. Your father was wrong. Mine was too. Us wronged ones, we stick together. I'm here to help you."

Sagesong doesn't listen to her words, not that much. One question rings in his mind. *Where am I?*

"What is this place?" The tom asks, looking sharply at Lacewing. The she-cat's face smooths from eagerness and determination to a look of knowledge.

"Some place. Not Starclan, I'll tell you, but better. It's where the successful cats go. Not the Dark Forest, I'd say. Better, way better than Starclan. It's safe here," Lacewing says gently, "I promise." Sagesong's whole body fills with a feeling of peace. He feels safe. Are the she-cat's words true? Maybe. It doesn't matter. He feels protected. This must be Starclan. Or better.

Lacewing purrs as the tom nods. "Your life isn't fair, but it will be worth it. I'll make you a leader. Leader of all four clans."

Sagesong pricks his ears, his interest clear on his face. His tail flicks to one side, excitement running beneath his skin. A Starclan cat, wanting to make him leader? It sounds too good to be true.

"You mean...I mean...how? Why? After all I've...done..." Sagesong doesn't finish, he doesn't want to. He fidgets uncomfortably. Lacewing smiles sadly.

"You've done nothing wrong," she almost grins, "You did what had to be done." Lacewing whisks her tail too, making eye contact with a now excited young tom.

Sagesong grins, wanting to spin and rejoice. He'd not thought he was wrong, not really, but hearing that he isn't only makes him happier hearing it from another cat, one that knew the whole story, one that didn't assume, one that only saw. Sagesong feels like he is floating. He only purrs.

"You'll be just like your father, you know, if you follow me. All powerful, you understand?" Lacewing nods eagerly, "All the power in the world." Sagesong's happiness runs out, and his purrs die.

"I don't want to be like Snapstar," Sagesong snaps, "He isn't my father. You should know that. You should know who is." Lacewing flicks her ear dismissively.

"Right, right. But Snapstar was powerful, correct? He was *successful*. You aren't. Not yet," Lacewing says slowly, rolling her eyes, "But that's why we're here, right? Enough small talk. Will you be my apprentice?"

Sagesong's mind goes crazy. *Apprentice? I've just become a warrior!* Sagesong wants to screech the words, the anger starting to show. Does she think he is weak? He doesn't need training! Sagesong lashes his tail. "No."

"No, no, not like that," Lacewing purrs, whiskers twitching in amusement, "I'll help you, teach you new moves. You understand. And I'll make sure you become leader, for no cost. No cost at all." Sagesong forces himself to calm down.

"Okay...okay..." Sagesong breathes, allowing his mind to process the information further. A Starclan cat, training him. Wouldn't it be his dream? He'd always wanted to train under Snapstar, and, even if Sagesong can't quite accept it, he was good at fighting *and* leading. *And leaving.* Sagesong growls to himself.

"F-Fine," Sagesong sighs. His tail flicks.

"I'll be your apprentice."

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Flickerpaw wakes to light piercing his eyes. His whole body feels fatigued. A grayish shape paces around the herb shelf, grabbing a green stem Flickerpaw can't make out.

"Flickerpaw, get up, now!" Tumblecry's voice cuts through Flickerpaw's foggy brain. Suddenly, the fuzziness disappears, and everything is clear. The world explodes into sound. A faint screech sounds, Tumblecry's urgent voice forces him to stand.

"What's...What's....happening?" Flickerpaw asks groggily, before panic seizes him. "Did some cat...some cat...pass-"

"No, just get up," Tumblecry urges, and Flickerpaw's panic slowly melts into confusion once more.

"What's happening then?"

"Come. On."

Flickerpaw shakes off his pelt, yawning quickly. The whole camp seems to shake as Orejump bursts through the medicine cats' den entrance. His face looks both panicked and excited, or maybe confused, as the tom pants.

"Fringe...Fringestrike..." The tom pants. His eyes look wildly, settling on Tumblecry with a look of relief.

"Fringestrike is kitting!"
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Chapter 30-

WARNING: MILD DESCRIPTIONS OF CHILD (KIT) BIRTH

Flickerpaw ducks beneath the moss and sticks that hold up the nursery, trodding through waving ferns. Fringestrike yelps weakly, panting more than she wails. Orejump paces, only stopping to lick his mate's ear occasionally. The black tom looks ready to collapse when he sees the medicine cats, eyes worried.

"She's not wailing anymore," he says, blinking in concern, "I mean...she was but...I'm scared that she's-" Tumblecry walks past the tom, flicking her tail in dismissal.

"That's what the daisy is for," the she-cat says, dropping the leaves, "May you chew the leaves, Fringestrike? They're-"

"-for strength!" Flickerpaw blurts dumbly, ears flattening. Stress courses through him. Tumblecry gives the white tom a glance.

"If you can't handle this," the she-cat warns, pressing the daisy leaves towards Fringestrike's mouth, "you can leave." Flickerpaw looks down, embarrassment heating his ears.

"N-No," the tom mutters, "I can handle it."

"Good," Tumblecry says, turning back to Fringestrike, "Chew on them for the juice, then spit them out please." The she-cat whimpers in pain, licking up the leaves. Flickerpaw watches as she chews them vigorously, biting down hard and grimacing the way through. The she-cat spits out the leaves and lets out a tiny wail.

Fringestrike wails louder, piercing through the early morning air. Flickerpaw presses his paw on the she-cat's stomach, hoping the gesture is comforting, but Tumblecry bats it away. "Let her be."

A little brown bundle slides out with another wail, right near Flickerpaw. Flickerpaw knows this part, somehow. Lick the kit thoroughly, until it's mewing louder than a wolf can howl. Flickerpaw scoops up the kit, getting ready to lick the bundle, before Tumblecry prods him in the gut.

"Another is coming," she explains, taking the kit from Flickerpaw, "You must catch them."

Fringestrike grimaces and screeches, flattening her ears in effort. Flickerpaw breathes in, grounding himself. He'll be okay. It's Fringestrike Tumblecry should worry for. And, of course, her kits.

Another bundle slips out with another screech. It is very light yellow, looking almost white. It's little cries and wriggles are precious, Flickerpaw thinks as he snags the little kit. Is another one of its way? Flickerpaw doesn't know.

Fringestrike finally breathes, gasping for oxygen. Her chest expands in great amounts, her whole body collapsing from the effort. She is done, with two beautiful kits. Tumblecry takes the kit Flickerpaw had been licking, dropping in front of Fringestrike. The little brown kit already mews next to his mother, and now, his sister. Flickerpaw smiles as Orejump's whole face blossoms into an expression of pure love and shock and he tumbles forward to meet his kits.

The little brown kit was one white spot on his nose, which reaches up to sniff at his father. A tom, a tiny, perfect, little tom. Fringestrike grins, licking the wet patches from the brown kit's fur. The little yellowish-white kit is already mostly dry, but she still yowls in protest of her brother getting attention.

Orejump crouches down, lifting the little she-kit, who goes limp in the black tom's jaws. She is plopped down at her father's paws.

"One she-kit and one tom," Flickerpaw grins at the couple, "Good job, Fringestrike." Fringestrike grins wider, nudging the brown kit. He squeals like a little hawk. Flickerpaw would name him Hawkkit, but it isn't his choice, so he sits and waits for the decision.

The two kits wriggle toward each other, the she-kit flopping down

and the brown tom settling next to her, jaw clasped around her ear. Fringestrike's voice is raspy, but she still laughs loudly and Orejump laughs with her.

"Cricketkit, for the tom?" Orejump asks, stroking the little tom kit with his tongue. The kit mewls weakly, yawning as he meows. Fringestrike nods, chuckling.

"He sure mews like one!"

Tumblecry smiles for nearly the first time, shooting Flickerpaw a fond glance. Flickerpaw continues watching, fiddling with the herbs at his paws and trying to pretend like he isn't beaming.

"What about the she-kit?" Fringestrike inquiries, "Sunkit? Sunnykit? Bloomkit, perhaps?" Orejump hums thoughtfully.

"I don't know...Bloomkit is beautiful, sure, but...a bit too simple...? Hm. I've always loved the name Sapkit or Webkit." The she-kit mews, as if agreeing without words. Both parents smile.

"Blisskit?" Fringestrike suggests, tickling the little she-kit with a paw, "Starclan, you're a tough nut to crack." The kit purrs in pleasure, turning her head to bite Cricketkit. The brown kit squeals, crawling a few inches away and burying his head into Orejump's chest fur.

Fringestrike shakes her head. "No...No...I don't like Blisskit," she says slowly, "You're good at names, Orejump. Her name will be Sapkit." Orejump's beam widens.

"Oh-Okay! Sapkit! I hope she's clingy like sap! Maybe I'll be her favorite cause I, like, named her!" Fringestrike smiles with a snicker.

"Sure, Sure."

Tumblecry nudges Flickerpaw with her paw, giving him a knowing smile. "Makes it worth it, huh? Let's let Fringestrike get some rest with the new kits." Fringestrike looks up with a blissful smile.

"No, no," she smiles, "I'd like the whole clan to know my kits. I want visitors. It's lonely in the nursery." Tumblecry nods with a

thoughtful hum.

"Sure, but get a good sleep in first," she advises, looking stern, "and when you sleep, sleep on your side with the kits near your stomach. They need to nurse on the first day. It's important they get enough milk, so if they're not drinking, please tell me." Fringestrike nods, batting away Orejump.

"Let me sleep, dear. You'll see me when I wake."

Flickerpaw smiles. He hopes so.

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"Have you seen Fringestrike's new kits?"

Sagesong looks up from his half eaten prey, blinking sleepily. "Uh. No?" Yewmist's mouth drops open like Sagesong had just admitted to eating fox-dung.

"Really? Really?" Yewmist questions. Sagesong nods. Yewmist's jaw drops. "Why? They are the cutest things, Starclan blessed for sure!"

"I mean..." Sagesong pauses, "I don't like kits. You know this." Sagesong flicks his tail, taking a bite of squirrel. Yewmist looks even more shocked.

"I *do?"*

"You...do. I think?" Sagesong almost laughs at the ridiculousness. He holds it back, and then pauses. Why not laugh? It'd be the first time in a while. Sage song lets out his laugh, a chuckle that turns into loud, bellowing, wheezing, giggles. Yewmist joins it, and they laugh, eyes scrunched up.

"Okay," Sagesong wheezes, breathing in deeply, "I'm serious now." Yewmist stops laughing and locks eyes with Sagesong.

"Are you really?" Sagesong pauses. Um.

"Uh. I....am?"
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The toms break out laughing again, quieter but definitely laughing.

"Okay," Sagesong tries again, "Serious. Kits. When do we see them?" Yewmist's eyes light with excitement.

"Uh, now! Obviously."

Sagesong nods, and allows Yewmist to bounce towards the nursery. The two toms duck in, and Yewmist whisk his tail in greeting. "Visitors!" Fringestrike smiles.

"Sagesong. Welcome," the she-cat purrs, "You're lucky. You've caught them when their awake. Orejump didn't. He was pretty grumpy about that." Yewmist laughs. Sagesong's lungs are sore, so he doesn't.

"This one is Cricketkit," Fringestrike says, pointing to the mewing little brown tom with a purr, "And this is Sapkit." Sapkit looks white, but Sagesong thinks she might be yellow or orange too. Maybe. It's hard to tell.

"They *love* me," Yewmist explains, "Look." Sagesong is ready to roll his eyes when Yewmist sticks his nose into the puddle of kits. Instantly the kits reach up and playfully bat at and lick the tom's muzzle. Sagesong chuckles. The sound vibrates through his throat, coming out in a little cough. Starclan. The tom needs water. *Or to laugh more.*

"Try it," Yewmist urges, rising his head out of the wave of kits. Sagesong shrugs. Why not? Yewmist backs away and Sagesong walks forward, bowing his head into the kit's chaos. Cricketkit recoils, a hiss trickling from his jaws. Sagesong feels half surprised, half amused.

Sapkit doesn't recoil. Even with her eyes closed she sniffs out Sagesong's nose. The kit rears up, claws out. Though she falls, the she-kit's sharp kit claws connect with Sagesong's vulnerable nose. He straightens up, a thin line of shock coming with the soreness of his nose.

"Starclan!" Fringestrike mutters, pressing Sapkit down, "Feisty, isn't

she? I'm sorry, Sagesong-"

"It's fine," Sagesong shakes his pelt, "That's okay. She's only a kit. Do you need any prey, Fringestrike?" Fringestrike sighs in relief, her composed smile returning.

"No, Orejump brought some," she says smoothly, "I might nap again." Yewmist shoots Sagesong a glance, leaning in to whisper in the tom's ear.

"That means you leave."

Sagesong rolls his eyes. "I know that, Yewmist. I'm not dumb."

"Goodbye, Fringestrike!" Yewmist calls as he trots out of the den, "Sleep well!" Sagesong slips out behind him, flicking his tail in farewell.

The tom's emerge into the bright orange evening sun. The yellow glow eats up everything, the same glow which will darken into red and then into a coat of black. Crickets caw in the distance, their distasteful songs lightening the air. Sagesong yawns, flopping down in the fragments of the remaining sun. A bullfrog croaks in the distance.

Yewmist joins Sagesong, yawning too. "Beautiful night, isn't it? Weren't the kits cute? Aren't you glad we went?" Sagesong shrugs.

"I did get assaulted but...sure. The kits were pretty cute." Yewmist nods for a moment before his whole face brightens and he grins.

"Do 'ya think... you know...that, hypothetically, of course, that me and Smoothpearl's kits would be cute?"

Sagesong rolls his eyes.

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umm y'all i've written so many sad scenes i've forgotten what it was like to write happy scenes so... it was so much fun to write this chapter! what do you think of it??
~~~

also the kits will be super duper important to the plot btw...

no more hints!!

have a good night/day!! bye!

Chapter 31-

(half a moon later)

Flickerpaw feels the warm new leaf sun bathe him in warm contentedness. The tom hears the buzz of a bee land in the middle of the blue bell next to him. He opens his eyes, just a crack, to see the bee dance over to the next flower. The tom smiles, watching it buzz into the air, making a wide circle in the sky.

Suddenly a large yellowish body leaps towards the bee. It darts higher, spinning to fly away. Sapkit, the almost-white shape, falls to the ground with a loud thump. Cricketkit spins toward her, crashing into Flickerpaw and crushing a pretty purple flower.

Flickerpaw's eyes are wide open now.

"No!" Sapkit spits in frustration, turning to Flickerpaw, "Did you see that? I almost got him!"

"Sure you did," Cricketkit teases, "The only thing you *almost* got was a broken neck."

"And a stung paw," Flickerpaw adds, "Bees can sting you, even if they're peaceful creatures. Just like how wolves don't like it if you get into their territory. They'll bite you." Cricketkit's eyes widen in fear as he scampers back onto his paws. His eyes are locked onto the light blue sky.

"Territories? Bees have territories?"

Flickerpaw chuckles. "Yes, and you both are in that one's. You even crushed one of his flowers." Cricketkit hops back, looking guilty. His mouth frowns as he stares at the destroyed flower.

"I'm sorry, Mr.Bee! I didn't mean to crush your territory!" the kit yowls into the sky, before readjusting his gaze to look sadly at the droopy flower, "H-Here...I'll fix it, don't worry!" Cricketkit vigorously claws at the ground, while Sapkit snags the flower up and shoves it into the over-sized hole. The kits cover the hole. Flickerpaw doesn't have the heart to inform them that the flower is still very much dead.

"Ta-da!" Sapkit exclaims, grinning at the flower with wrinkled petals, "It's happy now! All fixed!" Cricketkit nods, leaping in the air and spinning.

"Mr.Bee will be happy now!" Sapkit giggles in excitement. Flickerpaw nods in agreement, surveying the purple flower. The kits spin and giggle, hopping in excitement.

"Mr.Bee! Come back! We'll leave your flower patch alone now!" Cricketkit yells into the sky.

Flickerpaw doesn't tell them that most pollinator bees are female.

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Sagesong grunts, his muscles feeling like jelly as he twists around, tucking his tail and rearing to meet Lacewing. The tom blinks in confusion for a moment as the silver she-cat darts out of view. Before he can spin around she leaps and pins him on his back. Sagesong thrashes to no avail, so instead he goes limp. Lacewing hadn't taught him this much.

"Be quicker," the silver she-cat demands as she gets off of Sagesong. The orange and white tom huffs, breath knocked out of him. He *can't* be quicker; his fatigue is spreading throughout his whole body, paralyzing him. Sagesong finds it impossible to hunt and perform his duties by day and train by night, and keep the whole thing a secret. It feels like it's drowning him.

Sagesong looks up, trying to force his heavy body up from the slick muddy ground. The lack of birdsong and the darkness of this world had always unnerved the tom, but tonight the place feels disturbingly quiet and still. The dead trees sway in the wind, the
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wind that doesn't seem to reach Sagesong. The tom is confused, the feeling in his chest heavy and thick. He feels dread.

Lacewing nudges Sagesong roughly. "Get up." Sagesong forces his aching muscles up, pulling himself into a sitting position. Lacewing glowers in front of him.

"Feeling weak are we? Too bad. We need to keep training," the she-cat hisses, tail lashing, "Do you think you're better than me, now? Too good for training, eh?" Sagesong lashes his tail, curling his lip into a snarl to meet Lacewing's annoyed expression.

"No! I mean... I'm tired. I haven't gotten to sleep, to rest, for a week now. I'm exhausted," Sagesong says reluctantly, "Please, I need a break." Lacewing laughs.

"A break?" she asks with a snicker, "A *break?* Of course not. You are doing well, Sagesong, but not so well you can *quit.* You could become a leader soon, and yet you reject your training? Why interrupt something so sacred?" Lacewing looks agitated, tail flicking back and forth, her eyes warning the tom to not interrupt.

"Did I stutter?" Sagesong snarls, tail lashing to and fro, "I'm tired and *nothing* has changed! How are you so sure it'll be soon? You're *dead.* All you do is watch from the sky in *this* mucky place." Lacewing's tail twitches, eyes narrowing and fur bristling even without the wind. Her lashing tail betrays her otherwise calm and thoughtful expression. The she-cat clenches her jaw.

"Aloestar is the ruler for now. A queen, if you shall say. A queen on her last life," Lacewing laughs at this. Sagesong feels his chest become heavier, his lips curling into a snarl once more.

"What do you mean by that-"

"Oh, nothing dear," Lacewing purrs with a quick laugh, whisking her tail. Her whiskers twitch in pure amusement, like Sagesong was a kit chasing a butterfly. "Just your time is rapidly approaching. You should be prepared, that's all." Sagesong blinks. His heart has not stopped thumping. His head spins and he blinks again. The image of a white she-cat lying in the grass in a pool of red flashes in

the tom's mind. Sagesong swallows his worries, feeling his chest close up once more.

She is lying.

Chapter 32-

Sagesong fidgets with his paws, teeth pressed together in an almost-growl. Where is she?

The dawn sky shines bright, rich, orange and red as the huge reddish-yellow sun rises from the trees. Sagesong blinks, turning away to scan the bushes. He smells nothing but on-coming rain, arriving with the day-light. Starclan, he'd woken early for this! Where *is* she?

Suddenly, a rough prod in Sagesong's hind leg forces him out of his thoughts. He wheels around.

There Smoothpearl stands, smiling slyly like she always used to. When she knew she was winning. When she was smug, always right. Sagesong huffs in surprise.

"So," Smoothpearl starts, eyes narrowing into tiny dashes, "why am I here? What do *you* want?" Sagesong sighs. Lacewing had warned him about this. She had warned him to stay away from Smoothpearl until she apologized, but he wants his sister back. The tom blinks, swallowing his pride.

"Listen...I'm sorry," Sagesong says, refusing to say what for, "I apologized to Flickerpaw too." Sagesong feels unease stir in his stomach, guilt seeping into his chest. It feels like he's lying. *I'm not. I* did *apologize. I did.*

Smoothpearl's posture changes. Her eyes remain suspicious, her legs rigid. Her tail flicks cautiously. "Thanks," her lips curl into a tight frown, eyes watching Sagesong closely, "but that fixes nothing."

Sagesong's chest flickers with surprise and anger. His tail lashes. No. Sagesong's eyes harden. Apologizing has never made it better. It seems it never will. Sagesong lets a growl slip from deep inside his

throat, and Smoothpearl meets Sagesong with bared teeth.

"How?" Sagesong nearly roars, "Do you even want to fix anything? I've apologized to everyone! No one wants to fix it! You are all jealous, pathetic-" Smoothpearl interrupts the tom's speech with a laugh. Sagesong pauses, his chest seizing with rage.

"Pathetic, Sagesong? *Pathetic?* You're the one turning to insults, begging your siblings for forgiveness. You don't know how to apologize. You're not ready to stop being a kit. Stop calling me pathetic when I already have my life figured out and you don't. You're mad, Sagesong. Angry and thinking you deserve more. You don't. So *leave me alone."*

Sagesong lets the words sink in for a moment, his claws working furiously at the grass, tearing it up. Begging for forgiveness? *The nerve.* Sagesong hadn't been begging. He'll never beg for forgiveness, not to such a small cat. Sagesong breathes a sigh which morphs into a hiss.

"I'm sorry, I am," Smoothpearl says dryly, making it clear that in fact she is *not* sorry, "I'm sorry you couldn't be as successful. I'm sorry you're not okay. But I'm not sorry about my words, because they are true." Sagesong snarls again, leaping forward to become nose to nose with his sister. Who does she think she is? Sagesong leans forward, drawing to his full height. Smoothpearl slinks back, a nervous growl escaping from between her bared teeth.

"No," Sagesong hisses quietly, "I do have my life figured out. I'll be leader some day, unlike *you.* And when I am, you'll see. I'll be all powerful. But don't worry, I'll make sure to save the clan from fools like you." Smoothpearl takes another step back, fear flashing in the she-cat's gaze. For some reason, Sagesong is almost pleased.

Finally, the she-cat turns back to camp with a disdainful snort.

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Sagesong saunters into camp, head rising in pride. Three catches hang from his jaws. After Smoothpearl's foolish words Sagesong had to blow off steam somewhere. The tom can already hear the praise
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as he drops the three birds into the prey pile.

A tiny laugh sounds from below Sagesong, and he looks down. Sapkit and Cricketkit glare at him, whispering words into each other's ears and laughing. Sagesong's ears burn with a mix of confusion and embarrassment. Anger seeps into him, but he casts it out. They're just kits. They don't know better.

The kits prance forward, heads high and tails curled. Sagesong doesn't know what to say. Should he say hi? Should he offer them a moss ball? To play? Sagesong doesn't know. He blinks at the kits, stepping back from the pile. Do they want prey? Or do they still drink milk? Sagesong decides to offer them prey anyways.

"Hey...um...Do you guys like thrush?" Sagesong pushes his still-warm bird towards the kits. The yellow kit, Sapkit, rolls her eyes.

"We've never tried it," she says sassily, "If you were smart you'd know that." Sagesong frowns. He's already annoyed. This kit needs to watch her tone.

Cricketkit reaches, claws outstretched, for the thrush. Sagesong pulls it back into the pile. "No," Sagesong says sternly, "You don't eat prey. You can't have any." Cricketkit steps back with a low growl.

"Give it here! We're gonna play catch with it." Sagesong flicks his tail, his body heating with anger. The tom draws a delayed breath.

"I can make you a moss ball, but no prey," Sagesong offers kindly, though his tone is rough and rigid. Sapkit recoils with a hiss.

"No! We don't want to play with a moss ball, we want prey! Give it!"

Sagesong answers with a stern 'no' once more. Sapkit huffs, sitting with her tail flicking.

"We don't like you," the she-cat teases, "Not to hurt your feelings but we don't have to listen to you-" Smoothpearl's face, smirking like Sapkit is now, flashes in Sagesong's mind.

"Shut up!" Sagesong roars, the words spilling out before he can stop them. Almost instinctively the orange tom raises a paw, hissing. Time moves too fast.

Sapkit cowers, eyes wide, and Cricketkit scrambles away. Sagesong feels the clan's gaze rest upon him. The tom sees Fringestrike rushing forward in his peripheral vision. Sagesong feels the she-cat's emotions for a fast second, fear, anger, and the motherly urge to protect. The tom almost stops, almost puts his paw down and apologizes, but he doesn't. A familiar voice flashes in his ears. Lacewing's.

"Do it. She needs to learn somehow."

Sagesong's paw comes rocketing down, his claws out and unsheathed. His claws swipe downward, and Sapkit whimpers loudly. Sagesong returns to his mind for a moment, panic and guilt seizing him. The tom shoves his claws back into their sheathes, just inches away from the kit's face.

Sagesong's paw swipes Sapkit off her feet, striking her side and neck. The kit wails in shock, sailing across the camp's dust. Suddenly, time releases Sagesong. He blinks.

Voices rise, and cats stare, mouths open and moving. Sagesong can't make out the words, though he hears the insults in their voices. Their tones are sharp, dripping with venom. Ivypaw and her siblings rush forward in a mini crowd, teeth bared and mouths moving. Sagesong sees Orejump scoop up Sapkit and Cricketkit, rushing them into the nursery. Fringestrike leaps forward, screaming and slashing toward Sagesong. The tom stumbles back, mumbling apologies.

Sagesong can't hear any of the words, but his own thoughts are deafening. Was that wrong? There's no blood, thankfully, but does that matter? Sagesong tries to breathe, but his breath catches in his throat. No, he can't be wrong. He might have scared Sapkit, yes, but he had good intentions. He was just trying to make her learn. Yes, learning. Being an apprentice will be hard and mentors will be strict, and Sagesong was just teaching her. It'd be okay. Fringestrike would soon understand.

Sagesong steps back, now sure of himself. Sapkit will get over it.

"Sagesong!" for some reason, the word is clear and sharp. Sagesong freezes, recognizing the voice. Aloestar. Sagesong turns to see the leader. Her eyes are sharp and angry, and her fur is bristling. The she-cat's tail lashes. "We need to talk."

Chapter 33-

This isn't fair.

Sagesong's thoughts are jumbled as Aloestar paces in the small leader's den, her anger confined to a tiny space. It bubbles over and spills. Sagesong huffs. She's over-reacting. He was just teaching Sapkit a lesson. The clan should understand that. They should. And if they didn't they could go wash their mouths out with fox-dung. Sagesong opens his mouth to speak, but Aloestar silences him with a rough glare.

"Shut it. Shut *up,"* she snaps, finally stopping to fix Sagesong with another heavier glare, "You're *embarrassing* me, Sagesong. You're embarrassing yourself! You'll be the leader soon, and you act like *this?* You're l*ucky* Flickerpaw has chosen the path of a medicine cat, or *you wouldn't* be my heir!" Sagesong puffs out his chest, noticing how he towers over the old-looking she-cat. Aloestar breathes, but doesn't stop talking. "You'll lead us to shame, Sagesong, if you keep acting like this. You'll get yourself killed, if you mess with the wrong cat, Sagesong!" The she-cat sounds almost distraught, hissing out the sharp words.

"I was teaching her a lesson!" Sagesong hisses, "She has to learn sometime, you know! Her mother hasn't taught her anything-"

"Her mother hasn't tried to slash her!" Aloestar argues, tail flicking. Sagesong frowns. She is being unreasonable. He'd only tried to make her learn, if her mother wouldn't do it! Sagesong clicks his teeth angrily. Why could no one understand? It isn't a big deal; Sapkit is fine, just wailing to her mommy. Sagesong rolls his eyes.

"I was trying to teach her!" the tom repeats, hissing. His back fur bristles fiercely. Aloestar pauses, glare dissipating. Now she just looks broken, eyes shining with possible tears. Sagesong feels a little bad, but he hasn't been insulting *her.* It's the other way around. Sagesong feels a little worked up, but he tries to make his words comforting. "Listen, I'm sorry... Maybe I went too far?" Sagesong

isn't too sure. He thinks he did the right thing.

"You'll rule like Snapstar did," Aloestar mutters almost too quiet to hear, her eyes staring at Sagesong's, sadness hardening into anger. No, not anger. *Rage.* "You should've died! Not my she-kits! *You!"* Aloestar doesn't even pause to breathe, her fury thick and unshakable. "You'll rule like Snapstar! Do you have any *idea* how many lives will be ended at your paws, how many cats will beg at your paws? No, you don't!" The frail she-cat paces again, breathing heavily, her panic heavy. Sagesong backs away, regretting his previous kindness.

"Don't say that!" The tom yells, his body shaking, "I'll *never* be like him. You should *know* that!" Aloestar locks eyes with Sagesong, a new emotion rising in her eyes. Fear.

"No, Sagesong. I don't."

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Flickerpaw eyes the entrance of the medicine cat den as a bristling shape enters the nursery. It's Fringestrike, holding a frozen Sapkit in her jaws. Her whole body bristles, her tail lashing aggressively. Flickerpaw had heard the blow out outside of the den. Has something happened? Is Sapkit hurt? Flickerpaw's whole heart seizes with worry.

"What happened? We heard the-" Fringestrike fixes Flickerpaw with a glare so intense it sends him backing away. Something is wrong.

"Not you," Fringestrike spits, tail lashing, body shaking in anger, "You're all the same! Leave. Me. Alone."

Flickerpaw stumbles out of the way, confusion taking root in his gut. He looks to Tumblecry for support, but she only looks at him sympathetically. The she-cat steps forward. "It's okay, Fringestrike. Your kits are safe here. What happened?"

"Sagesong slashed my kit," Fringestrike snarls through bared teeth, tail wrapping around her yellowish kit. Flickerpaw's eyes widen, his mind racing. The tom opens his mouth to say something, anything
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at all, but all that comes out is an enraged growl. How could Sagesong do something like that? He should know better, and not only that, but he should apologize. Flickerpaw can hear him now.

"I was trying to help, don't you know that, Flickerpaw? Why don't you understand?"

It angers Flickerpaw so much his claws come out and screech along the stone like they too are furious. Flickerpaw breathes, trying to decompress. "I'm sorry for him, Fringestrike." Fringestrike growls, but her face softens. Tumblecry steps forward.

"With claws?" the she-cat asks, glancing at the crying she-kit next to Fringestrike. Fringestrike curls her tail tighter, eyes flashing with worry and fury.

"I...I don't think so." Fringestrike says, examining her kit further, "No...no. But she was thrown into a wall and her head is *throbbing* and-" Tumblecry gently shushes the fretting she-cat, gently nudging a sobbing Sapkit forward. The kit looks distraught, eyes wide and red. Her tears sprinkle onto the ground below, her words slurred and interrupted by little cries. Flickerpaw rushes to comfort the kit, earning a glare and hiss from Fringestrike. The tom doesn't stop moving, anger fueling his movements, and he bursts into out of his den

The camp is noisy. Orejump sits with his son, Cricketkit, at the edge of the clearing. A small group of three cats, Ivypaw, Whitepaw, and Cleftpaw, who blabber angrily next to the tom. Orejump's ears are flattened and he looks meek, almost embarrassed. Ivypaw turns, lip curled. Flickerpaw hears her words, sharp and dangerous. "*Dark Forest spawn! The audacity! Does he know what his brother did? He shouldn't even show his flea-bitten face!"*

Flickerpaw snarls in the she-cat's direction, but says nothing. He storms into Aloestar's den, chest puffing and fur bristling. His tail lashes as he sees Aloestar's face, terrified, sad, and furious all in one. Wait. Terrified? Fear flickers in Flickerpaw's chest, spreading to his throat and pushing words out of his mouth.

"What did you do?" Flickerpaw asks in an angry whisper, "You hurt

a kit. She might have head damage. Do you not think about *anything? "*

Sagesong's face is cold. Too cold. Scary, almost. Flickerpaw swallows his idle fear and pours anger into his face. His whole body vibrates, his teeth clicking angrily. Sagesong's posture, tall and unmoving, doesn't change. It only gets stiller, angrier, and Sagesong looks like he might pounce. Sagesong only frowns tightly. "I've already been lectured, thank you." Flickerpaw bares his teeth. Too bad.

"Good," Flickerpaw snarls, "Good, because your little stunt is going to affect others, Sagesong. But you don't think about that, do you? Because you *don't care."*

Sagesong huffs. "Oh, is it that bad for little Flickerkit? Grow up." Flickerpaw's heart burns like fire, and he can barely hold himself back. Aloestar pauses, shoving between the two. Her eyes blaze.

"Sagesong, you should be exiled for this," The leader pauses, glaring at the orange and white tom, "Perhaps I *should* exile you." Sagesong sneers at this.

"You can't," the tom snorts, whiskers twitching in amusement, "you just can't." Aloestar's eyes prickle with sadness.

"Go, Sagesong, now. If you do that again i'll-" Sagesong waltzes out of the den, shoving past Flickerpaw. Flickerpaw is left, shaking with anger, alone with Aloestar.

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Sagesong blinks at the orange-red fiery ball leaving its place in the sky. It's sun-down already. Has a patrol gone out? Sagesong glances at the freshkill pile. It swells with prey, squirrels, rats, mice, a few freshwater mussels. It's okay. No one seems focused on hunting right now. All their ratty minds can do is think about glaring at Sagesong like he's some type of kit murderer. He didn't do anything bad! The kit is fine. Sagesong rolls his eyes at the angry cats.

The camp is quiet, almost serene now, and yet Sagesong can't stand
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it. He needs to walk. And plus, it seems too sacred a place to think badly about their leader in. Sagesong nearly bolts out of camp, hoping no cat follows.

The darkening forest is calm and quiet, the crickets singing together like a marching band. The bird's last chirps echo through the quiet woods, and Sagesong imagines it's them calling their loved ones home. Sagesong walks, not really thinking, through the night woods. He has a place to be.

The tom makes his way there in a brisk trot, trying to keep from his tail sweeping nervously to the ground. He did nothing wrong. The clan might not agree, but that meant they were bee-brained. Sagesong's paws go faster as he thinks, the angry energy fueling him. The kit is fine! Why does no cat understand that? She's just a pathetic wailing bundle of-

He is here. The border between Windclan and Thunderclan.

Sagesong sits, tasting the air for the smell of an approaching Windclan cat. There were a few, probably marking the border, earlier in the day, but no cat is here now. Sagesong breathes in relief, eyes searching his paws.

Days, weeks, ago, there was a cooling body here. Sagesong's claws come out. He deserved it. Sagesong isn't evil, no. It's Voidflicker that's evil. Not Sagesong. Sagesong blinks, gaze slowly going over the empty Windclan moors. Did Voidflicker's paws once run over these moors? Did he-

No. Sagesong doesn't care.

Sagesong tries to find words to say, staring at where the invisible line between Windclan and Thunderclan would be. "I'm sor-" No. He shouldn't have to be sorry. He did nothing wrong.

Sagesong wheels around. He has to go home. Now. Sagesong's eyes search the woods, and anger flares in his chest. A pair of sharp blue eyes look at him from the tree. Suddenly they blink, and a black shadow disappears into the woods.

Sagesong stands, frozen. Flashbacks from his dreams flicker in his head. Sharp, accusing eyes. Sagesong can't stand this anymore, because one good thing can never happen to him. His own mother can't be a good thing that happens to him. Aloestar had followed him. Aloestar had saw him. Sagesong can't.

A thought crosses Sagesong's head, even if it feels evil. No, it doesn't. It's a warranted thought, but one he should act on? Sagesong doesn't know, but it keeps ringing in his head.

I'll have to kill Aloestar.

Chapter 34-

Content warning: kit abuse/harm, murder, death.

"What is it that you want, Sagesong? Tell me." Lacewing's voice drips with venom, anger radiating off of her in waves. Sagesong shuffles his paws uncomfortably.

"To be leader."

"Yes," Lacewing smiles almost cruelly, "Then you'll find my demands to be not so bad. Reasonable, even." Sagesong's stomach rolls and he feels almost sick. Acid turns in his stomach. The tom blinks.

"I mean..." Lacewing shoots the speaking tom a sharp glare, before returning to looking calm and collected. "It's your choice, Sagesong. It is not up to me." Lacewing's face is expectant, but she doesn't say exactly what she wants. She only implies it. Before Sagesong can begin to answer, he is thrown into reality.

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Sagesong wakes, feeling his stomach churn and his head ache. The decision sits on his shoulders like some twisted crown. *Prince or King? Prince or King? Choose one, Sagesong.* The decision seems obvious. Reasonable, like Lacewing had stated. But it isn't. It just isn't. Sagesong shudders, his nest suddenly feeling like it's choking him. Sagesong stands swiftly. The other warriors don't stir. They've been sleeping too far away, after the *incident.*

Whatever, it doesn't matter now.

The only thing that matters is the decision. That's it.

Sagesong breaks into a trot which borders a run. He bolts out of the den. The camp is sleepy and quiet.

The morning smells freshly of dew and sun, warm and calm.
~~~

Sagesong lets the stream of scents enter his nostrils. They calm him, almost, but his brain screams at him to move. Adrenaline courses through him, but *why?* Nothing is chasing the tom.

The only thing chasing Sagesong is the thoughts in his head.

Sagesong shudders shakily, his whole body nearly vibrating. *It's okay,* he reasons, although he knows it isn't, *it'd be better this way, anyways. The clan wouldn't like it at first, but they'd learn i'd be an amazing leader, wouldn't they?*

And just like that, a choice is made.

So prematurely.

"Sagesong." The voice is firm, and instantly Sagesong's fur stands on end. Aloestar. This is perfect, but so, so, twisted. He hates feeling like this. Like a monster. He isn't. He can't be. It's what Starclan wants, isn't it? If Lacewing wants it, it can't be wrong, can it? No, it can't. Sagesong tries to breathe and answer. It'll be okay.

"Coming," the tom mumbles softly, veering to look at Aloestar. Her gaze is cold, devoid of anything remotely good, before fading into pure, unbreakable, sadness. Sagesong is surprised. The she-cat doesn't glare, doesn't glower, doesn't look angry. Just broken. Sad, even. Sagesong doesn't know why his heart seems to wrench.

"Walk with me, will you?"

Sagesong nods his head, his mouth dry, his saliva sucked up. "Of course, *my queen."*

Aloestar looks sharply at the tom, eyes falling over the camp. Cracklight is the only other warrior awake, pretending not to stare at the two. His ears prick as Aloestar's gaze falls over him. "Yes, Aloestar? What is it you need?" Aloestar's frown remains, pulling down on her face.

"Watch over camp, will you?"

"Of course, Aloestar." Cracklight answers with a respectful dip of his head, eyes shining with honor. Sagesong purses his lips. Aloestar's

words mean nothing. He's just a place holder. Cracklight does know that, doesn't he?

Sagesong has better things to focus on right now.

Aloestar silently leaves the camp, and Sagesong follows, just as silent. Silent and conflicted.

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Rain pools in a shallow depression in the land, washing up the soil and making a thick, wet, mud. Perfect. Sagesong stops, shaking rain water from his whiskers. The rain has ebbed to a tiny drizzle, but the trees still drop rain water onto the two cat's heads. Aloestar snarls in disdain at the mud, looking at Sagesong in disbelief. Her eyes hold a question. *Why here?* Perhaps she'll find out soon.

Aloestar side-steps out of the mud, but Sagesong refuses to move, his paws sinking in the sickly brown substance. It's uncomfortable, but still calming. Calming. The word Sagesong is almost not familiar with. He isn't *calm*, no. He's far from it. He feels almost insane.

Crazy.

But it's okay.

He'll be fine.

Everything is going to be okay.

"Sagesong," Aloestar addresses with a cold voice, "What were you doing?" Sagesong knows what she is talking about. He does. And that's what's sick. They both know. Aloestar must know what he was doing, too. So why does she ask?

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sagesong says simply, voice edging on anger. Aloestar laughs. *Laughs*. Her gaze is frankly *unconvinced.* Sagesong stumbles over his words, repressing an angry huff. That'd be acting like a kit. And Sagesong is no kit.

"At the border. You know, don't you?" Sagesong closes his mouth,
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for once, and just listens. He listens to the woods, the morning cries of the birds, the waning sound of the crickets. Sagesong finds no answers there. He never will find answers there, will he? No. Oh well.

"I-" Aloestar answers for the tom, interrupting him.

"Sagesong, I've known it was you for a while now," Aloestar almost smiles, but her amused expression fades into her grinding her teeth against each other, "You are a murderer, aren't you?" Sagesong feels a new emotion bloom in him. Fear. Uncertainty. Aloestar clicks her teeth.

"I'm not stupid, Sagesong. You thought no one would notice when you left the den in the middle of the night, when, underneath the scent of rain and blood, there was *you.* A mother recognizes her own son, Sagesong." Aloestar doesn't look enraged, but hungry for knowledge. "I don't bother wasting time on convincing myself you couldn't, wouldn't, do this, because you *would*. You always would've, Sagesong." Sagesong's whole pelt bristles, his eyes flashing with must look like rage. The tom can't deny it, because Aloestar already knows. So what *can* he do?

The answer thrums in Sagesong's ears.

"You are a murderer, Sagesong. A murderer and a liar and much worse, too. You think no one notices the sudden wounds you wake up with? Starclan won't forgive you, Sagesong, and neither will I," Aloestar lets a low growl slip from her teeth, and anger stirs in Sagesong's stomach.

"You have no proof," Sagesong snarls, kicking up mud as his tail lashes to and fro, "You'll *never* tell anyone!"

"I know," Aloestar smiles sadly, "I'll die this morning, won't I?" Aloestar looks almost amused, enraging Sagesong further. *She wasn't supposed to know.* She was supposed to be surprised and terrified because she *deserves it.* She *isn't* supposed to know. Aloestar is too weak to lead this clan, and Sagesong will show her so. She is too weak to win. Yet she is smart enough to know. To know *everything.*

"Moons ago," Aloestar starts, eyes glazed over and fur on end, "Snapstar said I'd never tell anyone. And he was wrong. I've told you and your siblings what he said I'd never tell. You tell me the same now, and you'll be wrong again. My dead body will tell enough." Sagesong almost laughs. Sure it will. Not in the mud. Not in the rain. No cat will ever know. How would they after all, with no scent because of the mud and no blood because of the rain? Aloestar is wrong, for once. *Wrong.*

"It's not my fault," Sagesong hisses quietly, "That you're too weak to lead this clan. What management have you done? You're too scared to declare war on Windclan, too comfortable to change anything, and too spiteful to apologize to me for saying i'd lead like Snapstar. I'd never."

Aloestar smiles slightly. "You already are, son."

Sagesong feels rage pump through him as he leaps forward, claws unsheathed and nostrils flaring in anger. Aloestar stands still, letting herself be pushed straight in the puddle of mud. Sagesong can't stop himself, powerful muscles pushing Aloestar into the mud. Her pelt is soaked, the color of purity gone. No white anymore. Only brown.

And red. So much red.

Sagesong slashes his mother over and over, teeth bared. Aloestar fights back feebly. Her claws rake shallow cuts through Sagesong's shoulders, but to no avail. Sagesong is on top.

Sagesong is *winning.*

The tom doesn't feel guilty, or regretful. Just numb. He wants to be leader, but that isn't quite the reason. Aloestar is too weak. Sagesong has appreciated her, yes, but she'll lead them to death. And he can't let that happen.

It feels like ages before, with a wheeze, Aloestar hisses. "You *aren't* my son. You can't be." Sagesong sees only a red-brown she-cat, weak, sad. This can't be his mother, so small, so *pathetic.*

"You're weak!" Sagesong hisses, leaping forward and closing the

distance between the two. His claws shimmer in the early morning sun. White, the color of purity. Red, the color of blood. Sagesong doesn't care which color they are, not as the sharpened points sink into the sensitive skin of the throat.

Aloestar sputters, gurgling. The sounds are sickening. They sound like death, to many cats.

To Sagesong, however, they sound like victory.

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Rain falls steadily once more, washing the blood from Sagesong's paws. Sagesong feels the guilt wash from him too, only a sense of triumph washing over him. Lacewing was right. This is the best choice, the best outcome.

Sagesong has more things to do, however, so he washes off his paws in the steady lines of rain and heads away from the mud.

The tom heads back to the trail which Aloestar and him had once walked, pondering. Now what should be his excuse? Stupid Cracklight had heard it all. Sagesong would, no doubt, be a suspect. Even a kit can figure that out. It'd be too easy for some cat to suspect him. They don't understand why he did it. They don't understand anything. They never will.

Sagesong huffs, eyes searching the woods. Perhaps he could say Aloestar ran off. They got into an argument, and maybe Aloestar swiped at him. Then she stormed off. No, Aloestar is too calm for that. She'd never storm off. *But Sagesong would.*

Sagesong smiles. He'd got angry, heated, and stormed off to take a walk. Then the rain started, and Sagesong had lost her. Maybe the clan would find her. Maybe they wouldn't. Sagesong could fake feeling bad. It's easy. Sagesong breathes, relieving the tension pressing down on his chest and shortening his breaths.

Sagesong calms his shaking paws and stretches luxuriously. A yawn reaches his lips.

A sight reaches the tom's eyes.
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More eyes.

Wide, tiny, green eyes. Staring, unblinking. Sagesong freezes to stare back. A kit. Which one has green eyes, the tom or she-kit? Sagesong pauses to think. The tom, right? Cricketkit? Sagesong lets his tail sweep the ground anxiously. What did the kit see? By the fear in his eyes, too much.

Sagesong takes a few long strides forward, towards the un-moving kit. Cricketkit doesn't move even as Sagesong moves to stand over him, teeth bared. "What are you doing out of camp? *Kits stay in camp."* Sagesong knows that his tone is threatening, but he doesn't soften it for the kit. He is *angry*.

"I-I...I wanted to see what leaders do and-" Cricketkit's eyes widen, "Is...Is Aloestar-" So he did see. He saw. Ugh. Sagesong clicks his teeth angrily, furry burning in his eyes. A paw slams down on the brown kit's body, and the ball of fur squeals in fear.

"You tell a soul what you saw, a soul, i'll pull out your teeth *one by one.* Get it?" Sagesong lets the very tips of his claws sink into Cricketkit's stomach, just for warning, "I'm not joking." Cricketkit squeals, his little head bobbing. Fear. It thrills Sagesong. He's leader now.

And even kits listen to him.

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hi!! how did we feel about this chapter?? I'm not good at writing death but i'm trying to improve, so how was aloe's death? also was it too predictable? thanks for reading and I hope you enjoyed!!
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Chapter 35-

The early morning is fresh and pleasing, and Flickerpaw stretches, mouth parting in a yawn. He tastes the scents of the morning; grass, dew, bird, and the warmth of the sun. It smells- and looks- serene and calm, and the camp slowly wakes with the sun, yawning and stretching.

Flickerpaw slowly arches his back in a final stretch, ears pricking to hear the beautiful bird song and the comforting patters of rain. Instead the tom hears gasps and a panicked voice.

Sagesong.

Instantly the camp bursts with action and bustle, a stark contrast to the previous calm period of morning. Why does Flickerpaw's brother bring chaos with him where he walks? But this time, it doesn't seem to be his fault.

Sagesong arrives, gasping for air and releasing a scared looking Cricketkit. The kit scampers behind his mother, hyperventilating in panic. "Aloestar...Aloestar... She's missing! She's go-" Fringestrike shushes her kit, curling a protective tail around her young and glaring at Sagesong.

"What did you do-"

"We fought!" Sagesong blurts, interrupting, and he looks truly distraught, "We fought over...and...and-" Smoothpearl rushes forward, but her eyes aren't cold as they usually are when approaching Sagesong. They are warm and concerned and *scared.*

"I don't... I don't know. I stormed out towards camp and she must've been looking for me... It's all my fault." Sagesong's tears mix with the rain streaming down his face and weighing down his whiskers. Flickerpaw instantly rushes forward. His mother is gone. And this time, he trusts Sagesong. Because he's crying. When has Sagesong cried before? Definitely not recently.

Smoothpearl and Flickerpaw stand by, and Flickerpaw's thoughts spin. Where could his mother be? Lost in the hazy rain, in danger somewhere? Flickerpaw shudders, knocking the thought from his head. Aloestar wouldn't get lost. She'd have to still be close, looking for Sagesong in the storm. Yes, if they just left now...

"Organize a search party, now!" Smoothpearl orders no cat in particular, "Cr-Cracklight, can you do it? Please?" The she-cat's voice is desperate, begging, causing Cracklight to nod with a sympathetic look on his face, one that Flickerpaw almost doesn't recognize.

"Um, uh, of course, Smoothpearl. Fallowshard, Orejump, Cliffstoop, please come." The patrol groups together, eyes wide and panic radiating from them. Flickerpaw doesn't understand fully. Why would Aloestar just run off to search for Sagesong. It isn't like her. Couldn't she trust Sagesong to find his way back.

No, she couldn't.

Yes. Sagesong is right. This *is* his fault.

"Please let me come," Flickerpaw hears the words come from his mouth, although he is sure he'd only thought them, "I-I have a good nose and...my vision is okay and-" Fallowshard places a comforting tail along Flickerpaw's back, eyes silently beckoning the tom to stop. Flickerpaw does. He's rambling.

"We all understand," the she-cat says softly, almost whispering, "You're coming." Cracklight nods firmly. He agrees. Flickerpaw breathes in relief, but it doesn't release the pressure in the tom's chest. He still feels claustrophobic, compressed, and oddly, small, unimportant. Flickerpaw can't place the feeling, but it feels helpless, like he's simply just there. Another new feeling sinks in. A tendril of doubt flickers inside of Flickerpaw's stomach, wrapping around his heart and quickening its beats.

Will they ever find Aloestar?

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Flickerpaw feels mud sticking to his furry ankles, but he does little to shake it off. Determination burns his muscles. Or maybe that's exhaustion. Flickerpaw has run here, but he feels nothing. No pain, no fatigue, but nothing but emotional anguish. "Aloestar?"

No cat answers. Only the unrelenting wind reaches Flickerpaw's ears, filling him with dread. All the scent of anything would've been washed away by the rain and wind. Aloestar could've just disappeared like Snapstar, in the same way, and no cat would've known. Nervousness pricks at Flickerpaw. No, Aloestar would've never ran away from her clan; after all what reason would she have? But maybe she got too far from camp, maybe she had to find shelter, and all of her scent is gone. It'd be awful, but what else could've happened?

Therefore, Aloestar could still be living. Flickerpaw can't think, just look. Just *try*.

Flickerpaw pushes forward, through the mud, through the swamp of his fear, and tries to stay alert. He hears nothing but wind, no cat calling back, nothing, so that route is a no go. Smell and sight are his options, and he tries to use them well. His sense of scent is broken into tiny little tendrils of aroma, wind, rain, mud, and iron. Iron. Blood?

Blood.

Flickerpaw now doesn't use his senses, only his legs, to catapult forward through the mud, panting but feeling no tiredness. His whole chest collapses inward, pressing on his heart and pumping pure panic and trepidation through the tom. His energy is sucked into only alarm, his senses clogged with the image of the two leaders, Mantis and Funnelstar, standing over a dead Aloestar. The scent of blood gets stronger, stronger, until it feels like the tom must be standing in a sea of gore.

Flickerpaw looks down.

Down. Down. Down.

Blood. Mud.

Aloestar.

No. *No.*

Nononononono.

Flickerpaw coughs and vomits. He is sobbing. He hears screams, perhaps his own, he thinks, but they're not.

"Flickerpaw?"

Flickerpaw doesn't turn, doesn't recognize. His tears mix with the blood on his paws, the mud. But who would notice? Tears don't matter. They never will. If only they did.

Aloestar's eyes are closed, like she is simply resting, but she *isn't.* Because who could sleep like this, covered in blood, fur matted with sticky mud, wounds unhealing. No, no cat can go to Starclan like that. No. She needs to be groomed. Now.

Flickerpaw fastens his teeth into Aloestar's scruff, ignoring the other form beside him. The white tom pulls back with all his strength, and the mud finally lets Aloestar's body free. Flickerpaw gasps, throwing his head back and pulling harder, muscles shaking with effort. Aloestar slowly slides from the mud puddle. Her hind paws stay in the puddle, but the rest of her body is released from the mud.

"Flickerpaw," the voice is firm, but it doesn't matter. Aloestar deserves to be clean. She needs to be groomed-

"Flickerpaw, stop. She has to get back to camp-"

"Shut up!" Flickerpaw screams, snapping wildly at the place where the form had been. Cliffstoop's eyes, tired looking and wide, stare back, surprise lacing them. Flickerpaw doesn't apologize. He never will.

"Flickerpaw, we'll help you groom her, once she gets back to camp, but for now, please let us help you," Cliffstoop insists, her fur bristling slightly. Flickerpaw feels his tail lashing, and he wants to refuse, to insist she gets groomed *instantly,* because she deserves

that much, but, in a way, won't Aloestar stay longer if she isn't groomed? Starclan won't take her dirty, will they?

"Oh...Okay-"

Flickerpaw silently trails off, unaware of how exhausted his joints are. He just collapses onto Cliffstoop's side, feeling the vibration of her body as she calls for help. The rest is a blur. Flickerpaw stumbles over mud and then dry land, past charred trees and then little blossoming bushes. Why does new leaf, the season of new babies, flowers, and warmth, hold such death?

Finally Flickerpaw is put in camp, shoved into a nest, and given an herb he vaguely recognizes as poppy seeds. Flickerpaw licks them up, feeling nothing, tasting nothing. He dozes, but not sleeps. He is conscious, images flashing behind his eyelids and bloody puzzle pieces dancing around his head. Flickerpaw sleeps, finally, but he wakes feeling even more tired. Tumblecry is always nearby, waking him from relentless nightmares that his brain refuses to remember.

Flickerpaw knows that days blur together, he knows that his siblings must feel the same, and he knows that Starclan must hate him. Why make him keep finding these bodies? Did Flickerpaw do something wrong? He's worshiped Starclan his whole life, like every cat, thanking them at every turn. But now, what is there to thank them for?

This ends today. Screw you, Starclan.

Chapter 36-

Sagesong has done a good job.

He's checked all the boxes, been an *amazing* actor. He's *won.*

First he acted confused and distraught, which was easy. He'd just roughly copied Flickerpaw, and then he'd wailed like a good little cat at the sight of Aloestar's body. The tom had forced tears on the ready, which he used accordingly, because he's never really a crier. Some cat would notice. So far though, Sagesong has done well.

The tom slumps in his nest, watching shadows cut through the feeble rays of sunlight. He's good at this too, staying confined to only his nest and refusing food even if his stomach throbs with pain.

Faking grief is not hard when it's all around you.

"Sagesong," Tumblecry says tightly, her eyes cold and sad looking, "Come, get up. Our clan needs a leader."

Sagesong's heart flickers with excitement, but his face doesn't show it. He tries to look drained. What is he supposed to say here? Yes? No?

Act like a leader.

"I'm too young," Sagesong sighs into his nest, the moss capturing the sound, "I...can't. I'm sorry Tumblecry." Tumblecry's lips purse tightly together, her eyes not softening. Does she not buy it? Fear ignites in Sagesong's heart. If she doesn't believe it...

"We've waited long enough, Sagesong. The clan needs a leader, even a young one," Tumblecry says firmly, "So come on. I'll show you how it's done, even if we don't have a moonstone or moon pool, like in the old territories." Sagesong raises his head sadly, trying to look drained.

"Okay," he mumbles, "...Does Starclan accept me?"

"We'll see," Tumblecry says, nudging Sagesong to his paws, "Follow me."

Sagesong wobbles after the she-cat, blinking sleepily at the bright sunlight pouring down from the baby-blue stretch of sky. The clan is like a ghost town, every cat either quiet and staying in cooped up in their dens. Sagesong frowns at all the sadness he's caused. Don't they get it? What leading had Aloestar really done? What important decisions had Aloestar made?

None.

This is better for the whole clan. This is better for Sagesong, too. He'll be able to prove to everyone what a good leader he'll be.

And then it'll all be okay. Sagesong just needs time.

Sagesong follows Tumblecry as they duck out of camp and into the tightly knit forest. The tom carefully and delicately steps over a few thick roots of the woods, listening to the gentle bird song lightening the atmosphere. Even if Sagesong's heart is knotted up and frankly conflicted, the birds seem to be validating his actions, like Lacewing has in these previous nights. He doesn't regret it, but he does feel bad. Flickerpaw is destroyed, and though the two's relationship is far from good, Sagesong is no monster. He has feelings. And his feelings reach out of Flickerpaw's and Sagesong can feel his sadness, his pure misery, and therefore he feels a mere chunk of it.

Tumblecry expertly moves through the green trees, her lean body perfect for traversing the large roots and undergrowth. Sagesong's is like her's too, lean and scrawny, but for many different reasons. Anger bubbles in Sagesong's stomach. Yes, Aloestar deserved to die. How could she tell the tom so late?

After a few more moments of walking, grass and tangled brambles to a smooth gray surface. The river laps at the rocks, the side closest to the water looking like the frigid liquid had taken a bite out of the boulder. As Sagesong surveys the rocks with interest, he notices a few drops of red-brown. Blood? The miniature speckles lead to the

murky blue water. Sagesong looks from the specks to the water, confused at their connection.

"Hold your paw out," Tumblecry orders, her claws coming out from their sheathes. Sagesong holds out his left front paw, wincing at the sharp pain that meets it. Tumblecry retracts her claws, looking almost pleased. "Okay, crouch down and rinse the cut in the water. Starclan will talk to you then." Sagesong nods nervously, silently hoping to meet Lacewing. The tom hobbles over to the water, blood dripping into the stream below. Sage song stares at his reflection, warped and twisted.

But after all, won't his reflection be warped forever, after what he's done?

With that final thought, Sagesong slips into an unnatural sleep.

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Sagesong wakes in a dark, thick forest. Definitely not Starclan. Definitely not where Sagesong expected.

A tiny orange kit sits in the midst of the darkness, her face somber. Something deep inside Sagesong recognizes the tiny kit, but he can't put his bloodied paw on it. Who is this kit? Is she important?

"Sagesong," the she-kit says hardly, her voice dripping with pure hatred, pure venom, "I liked you, Sagesong." Sagesong blinks, lips pursed.

"Who are you? Why has that changed?" Sagesong asks, his voice almost begging, yearning for knowledge, "It doesn't have to. I haven't done anything wrong. You know that right?"

"Starclan has refused you your lives, Sagesong. You killed your mother. You killed *our* mother," The kit spits, and suddenly Sagesong remembers. Orange fur. A kit. Maplekit. Sagesong's teeth click in nervousness and anger, eyes flashing with fear.

"She wasn't leading right!" Sagesong mews defensively, "She was going to kill us all!" His fur bristles two and fro, and his tail puffs out and touches the ground, sweeping dead leaves. Maplekit only
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stares, disdain evident in his gaze.

"You've already killed three innocent cats, Sagesong. Your very leadership will kill you all. Do one good thing with your life and let some other cat lead." Sagesong lets a growl slip his teeth.

"You're a kit. You can't control me now. I won't step down. I was *promised* this role," he almost yells, tail lashing angrily, "Do you get it, Maplekit? I'll keep killing if it benefits my clan." Maplekit remains calm looking, but her little teeth bare and her glare turns deadly. Who knew a kit could look so threatening?

"You hurt a kit, Sagesong," Maplekit suddenly smiles, tail swishing. Out from the trees, several more tiny bodies step out from their dark surroundings. Their colors fade together, their starry pelts shimmering almost threateningly. Maplekit shows her glimmering see-through teeth. "You don't hurt kits. *We don't like you."*

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Sagesong wakes, swallowing his fear. His expression stays calm, and he forces a small smile. No joy hides beneath. He has no name now, no lives, or at least he doesn't think so. But he has to pretend. He can't let Tumblecry know he was denied his lives. How can he be leader then?

"That was... something," Sagesong says breathlessly, because it was, "Is...is that it?" Tumblecry narrows her eyes in confusion.

"That was...quick," she says, suspicion radiating off of the she-cat, "Did the lives hurt?" Aloestar had once described some of the lives feeling ferocious while entering her system, filling her with energy but also stinging like fire. Sagesong, no, Sage*star,* nods slowly.

"Some of them," the tom says vaguely, "So...What now? What do I do first? I don't know how to do this, Tumblecry." Tumblecry's eyes soften slightly, just barely, and she waves her tail grandly.

"There's so many things to do, Sagestar. You should focus on one thing at a time, and right now our clan is destroyed. There is no question, every cat in that camp doubts you. How could they not?
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So give them something to be excited about. Focus on that, right now," Tumblecry answers earnestly, turning back towards camp, "Come on."

Sagestar feels stronger, his feet tracing the forest floor with a new lightness. They'll feast, then. The clan has enough prey for it, definitely. Even with the air of grief, hunting and border patrols still go out, Cracklight and Cedarmist stepping up and helping organize them. New-leaf has been well to the clan this season, the wind warm and, even with the still-charred forest, the prey is abundant. A feast could raise the clan's spirits, right? Maybe it could be used as an excuse to honor Aloestar.

Sagestar is trapped inside of his head, stumbling over a large tree root and barely catching himself. His face is inches from the forest floor. Sagestar clears his throat, rising and glaring at the concerned, and maybe a little amused, Tumblecry. Tumblecry stares back, not intimidated. Sagestar grumbles.

It doesn't take long for the two cats to meekly walk into the camp, heads down but eyes up. Sagestar's clanmates wait outside of their dens, blankly staring with a numbness Sagestar can't place. His clanmates take a few long seconds to start chanting Sagestar's new name. "Sagestar! Sagestar!" The chanting is sad and quiet. No cat in particular cheers the loudest, each quiet and seemingly fearful. Sagestar purses his lips, trying to offer a tiny smile.

The tom veers out of the crowd's view, leaping onto the high stone ledge, which Sagestar is not sure has a proper name. The tom stands above his gathered classmates, power surging through him. He can see everything. He can see their hesitation, their doubt, their *fear.* Sagestar is powerful, yet he is not satisfied. He must do more, he must make this clan stronger. He must *be* stronger.

"My clanmates, we all are grieving, but we cannot let it weigh us down," Sagestar starts, "Today we'll honor Aloestar's life for one last time, with a large feast. Cedarmist, gather all of the voles out of the pile. Those are not to be eaten. Those were her favorite prey," Sagestar attempts to sound choked up, and he clears his throats, "As much as we can eat. Aloestar would like that." A few cheers break out, a little bit louder than the last time.

Sagestar sits, surveying his clanmates slowly grabbing their favorite prey items and chewing. The tom smiles.

He really is a good leader.

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hi!! after next chapter, this part will be done!! there'll be a season change and it will be part two, so next part of the story (:

hope you guys enjoyed this part! it's almost over! surprisingly, this was the veryyy long beginning of the story, and now the REALLL excitement starts, with Sagestar being leader and all!! hope you enjoyed this chapter, I think you guys will really like the next one (:
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Chapter 37-

Flickerpaw can barely think straight as Fringestrike's gaze bores into the white tom's pelt. The tom fiddles with a smooth dock leaf in his paws. Sapkit eyes it with interest, eyes wide. "You mean the green thingy can heal my paws?" The she-cat asks with pure wonder, her eyes like two saucers. Flickerpaw nods numbly.

"Um. Kinda," the tom answers shortly, "Yeah, I guess so." Sapkit nods, probably sensing the tension. The she-cat's tail remains curled, however, and her lips stay separated.

"...Woah!" Sapkit whispers in awe, "That's-"

"Come on, Sapkit," Fringestrike's eyes are cold and cautious. Flickerpaw doesn't have the energy to feel sad, or care that much. The she-cat has her reasons to be anxious, if not scared, around Flickerpaw. Sagestar, then Sagesong, had ruined it for Flickerpaw. But that's okay. Flickerpaw has no interest in talking to her, either. Or any cat, for that reason.

Flickerpaw's gaze falls over the medicine cat's den, where Tumblecry was patching up Crevicewhisker's shoulder. The she-cat had stumbled over a root while chasing a vole and sliced her shoulder. But what hunter pursues a vole? It frankly isn't worth it.

Oh well. Who cares? Not Flickerpaw.

Flickerpaw likes to say he's proud of himself. After Aloestar's death he'd collapsed, sure, he'd cried, but he got back up. Quicker this time. It didn't take a moon. Or a week. It'd taken two days for him to force himself up, to help little Cricketkit with a thorn lodged tightly into his tender paw pad. It'd taken two days for him to help Tumblecry silently sort herbs, the same activity they had done on his first day of apprenticeship.

Plop.

Plop.

Plo-

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather under the...high ledge... for a clan meeting!"

Sagestar's voice rings over the camp, and instantly, the clearing of cats gets louder with the bustle of cats fleeing to the center of camp. Flickerpaw is one of those cats, unenthusiastically milling closer to the pretty rock-carved walls decorated with butterfly wings. Smoothpearl slowly sets in beside Flickerpaw without a word, her eyes troubled and mouth curled into a frown. Flickerpaw nods to his littermate, and she smiles back. A fake, plastic-looking smile that is only there to convince Flickerpaw that Smoothpearl is okay.

She very clearly is not.

Flickerpaw sits at the very back, trying to disappear. The bustle of cats die down, and what seems like a million pairs of eyes stare up, at the grinning face of Sagestar. How can he be so unaffected? Perhaps he is trying to be strong for the clan but... That's okay. Everyone copes differently, after all. Flickerpaw wishes he could cope like Sagestar is now.

"As you all know," Sagestar starts, his smile faltering and his eyes looking thoughtfully at the crowd, "At our old territories, which I regret not seeing, there was a moon pool. This marked many ceremonies, such as my own leader ceremony. But also...Medicine cat ceremonies." Flickerpaw's heart jumps with suspicion, and he looks at Sagestar through narrowed eyes. What is he implying?

"But without one, ceremonies can be...tricky. I decide to treat this as a warrior's ceremony," Sagestar takes a breathe, and so does Flickerpaw. He's imagined this day, of course, but with Aloestar standing above him and saying he was going to be a warrior, not a medicine cat. But so many things had changed, hadn't they? For some reason, even after dreaming about this day for ages, Flickerpaw does not feel a hint of excitement.

"I, Sagestar, leader of Thunderclan, call upon my ancestors to look

down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your code, and I commend him to you as a full medicine cat in his turn," Sagestar beams, and Flickerpaw numbly steps forward. He pushes through the sea of congratulations, and stands in the front. Sagestar smiles down at him.

"Flickerpaw, from this day on, you will be known as Flickerfire."

The clan erupts, cheering the new name that sounds foreign to Flickerfire's ears. "Flick-er-fi-re!" The cats cheer in tiny chunks, some beaming with pride, some straight-faced and sad looking. Flickerfire forces a smile, a fake, plastic-looking smile that is only there to convince the clan that the tom is okay.

He very clearly is not.

Flickerfire gently navigates through the crowd, but he doesn't return to his spot next to Smoothpearl. His eyes scan the many cats, the many soft, almost sad, smiles. He nods at them, thanking the faces while looking for a specific one.

Tumblecry.

Did she know about this? Did she approve? Did she pick his full, final, name? He wants to know.

Flickerfire finds Tumblecry quite easily, and he offers a tight smile Tumblecry must recognize.

Tumblecry is not smiling. She is frowning deeply.

"You weren't ready yet," Tumblecry instantly explains, but it doesn't sound much like an insult, just an observation, "You can't do much alone, can you? Sure you treat injuries, sort, make poultices but...you can't help a she-cat give birth, you can't identify green cough or yellow cough or red cough or kit cough yet..." Flickerfire frowns. He can't. She's right.

"I can...learn. Even as a warrior, I'll learn," Flickerfire tries to sound confident, reassuring, but right now he is only hoping, "I promise." Tumblecry looks exhausted as she slowly dips her head and wheels around.

"Congrats, Flick."

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Flickerfire slips into his nest, chest feeling heavy with burden. It weighs him down, weighs his eyelids down, and all he wants now is sleep.

"Flicker...fire!"

Smoothpearl.

The comforting scent of his sister seeps into the medicine cat's den, warding off the sharp aroma of herbs. Flickerfire cracks a singular eye open, drinking in the image of his white and orange sister and...Yewmist. The tom's ugly dark yellow fur shines in the den, and his goofy nervous smile irritates Flickerfire. The tom doesn't smile, narrowing his eyes to mere pin-points.

"Flickerp-"

"Fire," Flickerfire corrects Yewmist, voice cold, "Hi, Smoothpearl."

"Hi," her paws shuffle despite her smile, "We should...talk. You know?" Flickerfire rises from his nest, letting suspicion radiate from him. Smoothpearl's eyes gleam with contentedness, though, so Flickerfire shakes his pelt free of loose moss and nods.

"Okay."

The three cats leave the dim, stuffy, den and go into the hot, sun-warmed camp. Flickerfire narrows his eyes against the sun and follows the two out of camp.

They walk the trail Sagestar and Aloestar must've once walked, angry or calm, fast or slow. Flickerfire feels physically sick at the thought, but he walks forward, antsy to know the subject of their 'talk.'

"What's up?" Flickerfire nearly grumbles, eyes searching Smoothpearl's face or an answer, but he gets nothing but an anxious smile and soft eyes. Flickerfire wants to insist, but Smoothpearl
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answers faster.

"Yewmist, this is awkward. Can you...like...go for a bit?" Smoothpearl asks, and Yewmist instantly nods and falls behind. Flickerfire draws closer to his sister. What's going on? What's happening?

"So um... Yewmist said...he liked me," Smoothpearl swallows. Flickerfire doesn't care. This is old news. Flickerfire casts the she-cat a doubtful, confused, look.

"And..." Smoothpearl licks her lips nervously, and her ears flatten in embarrassment, "I like him back. We're...mates...now." Flickerfire's eyes widen, and he stops, claws working the dirt and green leaves. Old images of Snapstar's large paws, his cold eyes, and his charming but lying words. What if Yewmist was like that? What if...

"Today?" Flickerfire demands, "He said that today?" Smoothpearl looks like she's gotten caught.

"No...that's what I'm telling you about! I'm not going to apologize, I just...needed you to know something," Smoothpearl's tail flicks across the ground, stirring the undergrowth. Her fur is puffed up, her teeth clicking nervously. The she-cat's once flicking tail settles protectively around her side, her white tail-tip touching her stomach.

Flickerfire's world spins. He blinks to clear his vision and his sister smiles.

"You're going to..." he's getting this wrong, isn't he? She can't...

"Kits, I suppose," Smoothpearl smiles softly, "Yewmist's. We're happy, Flickerfire. I promise." Flickerfire almost vomits. The idea of his sister having kits is unfathomable. She's too young. Flickerfire *just* became a warrior. This can't be...

"I'm twenty moons old, well over apprentice age," Smoothpearl says firmly, "I'll be over a year over my apprentice's days, nearly, by the time they come. I'll be fine." Flickerfire forces calm into his posture. Okay. He'll be an uncle, like Cracklight was to him. He'll love those

kits, won't he? He truly will. This is a good thing, right? Flickerfire, for some reason, though, can't smile.

"Oh...okay," Flickerfire says, trying not pace, "That's good...right? Like...really good? How long have you known? How many?"

"Um," Smoothpearl smiles, "It's good for me and Yewmist. But...I don't know how long I've known, really. You just know. Like how you know you should drink milk as a kit. Just like you know to twist in the air when you're falling. Kinda like an instinct, ya know? You can't know how many, considering...I'd need a medicine cat to try and predict. I don't think I'm far enough along."

"Uh, um, yeah. I agree, I guess," Flickerfire nods, "Tumblecry could help." A sudden uneasiness makes Flickerfire feel sick. "Will you...Will you tell Sagestar?" Smoothpearl's fur instantly bristles.

"He...He doesn't really...deserve to know, ya know?" Smoothpearl suddenly frowns, eyes troubled, "Is it bad to feel...unsafe around him? I mean...he lashes out because a kit was being rude. That's what kits do. They're trying to learn to, ya know, be cats from scratch! Obviously they'll slip up! I can't have him around my kits, not a lot. What if he hurts them or scares them or...hurts me? I couldn't bare that if it-"

"He hurts you, I promise, me and Yewmist will gut him over and over, until all his nine lives are gone," Flickerfire says comfortingly, tail wrapping around her back. The tom feels a nervous bubbling in his stomach. Is he joking? Flickerfire isn't sure, but his mind screams that he really isn't. All he knows is that he'll try his best to protect these kits with his life. Forever.

But it sure is sad, though, that the two cats can't trust Sagestar to do the same.

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yes, flick is a confirmed canon nickname.

if you know you know.
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PART TWO

Hi!! this marks the end of the beginning for my story! yes, this was in fact only the beginning! I hope part one of this story has been interesting to my readers, but part two will (hopefully) be even more interesting! so...yeah!

This part two has a season change (it is now greenleaf!) however, POVs will be the same two cats you all know!! this part will include the end of the story, too!!

hope y'all honestly enjoy and find this part interesting and thank you so much for the support so far!!

Chapter 38-

Two moons later

Sagestar is angry. No, pure fury courses like venom through the tom, and he works his paws into the moss of his nest, tearing it into thin shreds.

How could she? We're siblings.

Smoothpearl had given birth to four healthy mewling kits. Three toms, one she-kit. Sagestar could barely look at the ugly scraps. Sure, Sagestar's and Smoothpearl's relationship isn't the best, in fact it's frankly bad, but hiding kits from him? That's just low. Sagestar had noticed her swelling stomach and the way Yewmist doated over the she-cat, no, the way the whole clan doated, but he'd chalked it up to her being a pretty she-cat. Maybe even a popular one. But not *this.*

And now Smoothpearl just has kits, without telling Sagestar she was going to do so? They aren't part of his clan, as far as he's concerned. They barely exist, really.

But now, from the nursery, their little tiny cries can be heard and his clanmates came bearing news of cute little yawns and tiny milk mustaches. It isn't fair. Sagestar should've known, should've noticed. But he hadn't. He'd been too busy making sure the little scrap Cricketkit didn't snitch on him. He'd already found a way to shut the tom-kit up before his ceremony. He'd just make sure he couldn't speak. That easy.

But now Sagestar has another problem. How can he punish Smoothpearl for her misdeeds? Or her defenseless kits, who technically deserve it just as much. Sagestar doesn't know. He can't kill his sister; it'd be too suspicious, clearly. The kits could be easier to stage.

For once, Sagestar could take inspiration from Snapstar.

No. Sagestar tries to be firm to himself, quickly rejecting the thought. Plus, who said Sagestar needs to kill the kit? He can just as easily just...take it away. It'd hurt the same, without the guilt. But it'd have to be quick, and when the kits are older. The weather will be warm, the kit at least a little strong, strong enough to survive and perhaps eat a little prey just in case the other clans don't have nursing queens. Perhaps Sagestar would take away the least strong kit, the skittish one, or maybe the rude one. The one that didn't want to be a warrior, or such.

It's going to be okay.

Sagestar will try to like the kits, at least for a while. Perhaps that starts with meeting them and learning each of their names.

Sagestar forces his mind to be quiet and his fur to lie flat. His plan is perfect. He wouldn't be a monster for taking the kit to a different clan. Whichever kit it was would be fine, perfectly fine, and he could sustain the urge for revenge while helping the clan. He would only be removing the weak link, after all, the least helpful.

Sagestar rises to his paws with a small smile on his face, ducking to avoid the rough rock walls above his head as he slinks out of the den.

The tom makes his way to the nursery quickly, feigning pure excitement. It isn't really hard. He does feel excited, to some degree. Smoothpearl having kits is a little exciting, considering they're family, even if barely. He's an uncle now. Something, except his clan, is his.

Sagestar's nephews and niece.

Sagestar ducks into the milk and moss smelling nursery, blinking to adjust his eyes to the sudden darkness. Inside its confines hold little mews of pleasure. Little kits. Smoothpearl's eyes are blue and rich, filled with such a love Sagestar has only seen in Aloestar's eyes, when he was young. Smoothpearl looks up, and instantly all love disappears. Her eyes go cold, her tail suddenly wrapped

protectively over her litter of kittens.

"Sagestar. Greetings," The orange white she-cat says cautiously, "I'm not supposed to have visitors and-"

"You let everyone else visit," Sagestar interjects firmly, "And, after all, they're my kin. I should be able to see them." Sagestar draws himself to his full height, trying to see the little kits entrapped in the she-cat's loving gaze and firm tail. He wants to see the smallest one, mostly, but also the one who mews the loudest and quietest.

"You know why that's different," Smoothpearl says carefully, giving one black kit head a lick. The little kit squeals. Sagestar feels his heart harden with anger, and maybe a mix of hate.

"They're my kin," Sagestar hisses, claws coming out, *"Mine."* Smoothpearl freezes, looking rigidly from the sharp weapons to Sagestar's agitated face.

"Sagestar," she says, not fearfully, but dangerously, "You've never been a mother. You're not a father. But do you know what Aloestar was willing to do for us? Do you know what I'm willing to do to you, if you even look at these kits wrong? Do you know what Flickerfire said to me, moons ago? He'll *gut* you, Sagestar. Yewmist will too, he'll tear out your throat and *eat it.* So take a singular step closer and I'll make sure to make you regret for the next short portion of your life." The she-cat's face is smooth, like she is simply warning Sagestar what will happen. Like she actually cares about what will happen.

Sure.

Sagestar narrows his eyes, a growl bubbling in his throat. Smoothpearl stares back, straight into Sagestar's eyes. Sagestar isn't scared of her. He doesn't look away; it'd make him look weak. Instead he slowly lets four small words roll off of his lips.

"You'll pay for this."

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Flickerfire is more than thrilled at the birth of his sister's kits. He
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can't visit them instantly, not exactly. Sure, he'd been at the birth, but it'd been without Tumblecry, kind of like a twisted test. It'd been way too stressful to enjoy, and Smoothpearl's screeches had made his stomach roll and vomit bubble in his throat. But he didn't puke, instead he'd licked off a tiny tortoiseshell tom and put him to Smoothpearl's head. He'd given a little reddish kit to Yewmist, who'd nearly cried with happiness.

Flickerfire had done okay, but Smoothpearl had done even better. The tom had felt the strongest pride ever, looking at his nephews and niece. But Tumblecry had called him out from the den, saying they had other work to do. They hadn't, but clearly Smoothpearl had needed rest, so Flickerfire had left that alone. Fringestrike had surprisingly been overjoyed with the kits, complimenting them and telling her they were perfect. Flickerfire didn't even get glared at.

Flickerfire licks his paw and runs it over his head for the fifth time in a row, feeling the already smoothed fur being pressed further down. The tom is almost anxious as Tumblecry's gray-blue head peeks in through the medicine cat's den entrance. The she-cat frowns at Flickerfire even through the small mouse she holds. The she-cat carefully sets the mouse down, tail settling on Flickerfire's back. "Nervous about seeing your sister?" Flickerfire frowns.

"I mean...of course," the tom sighs, his paws shuffling anxiously, "I've seen them before but... I don't know their names, I don't know their personalities, I don't-"

"No one does," Tumblecry says softly, "They're kits, Flickerfire. For at least a moon, no cat will know their personalities fully. As for their names, go find them out." Tumblecry isn't smiling, but she looks almost close to it. Flickerfire smiles anxiously. He should.

Flickerfire barely nods before he shoots himself from the den, tail curled and mouth basically grinning. He's so thankful that the nursery is so close to the medicine cat's den, just across from it. The tom is forced to slow into a trot as he approaches the nursery, slipping into the inky darkness.

The den does not smell of milk and comforting moss nests. It smells of anger and *Sagestar*. Instantly, Flickerfire pauses, fur bristling at

the smell of anger. Smoothpearl's and Sagestar's. Flickerfire all but bolts in. Something bad could be happening.

Flickerfire nearly bumps into a puffed-up Sagestar, who doesn't seem to notice the white tom. Flickerfire's pelt ripples with anger and unease. Flickerfire slips around Sagestar to get in between the two. He tries to remain calm, but his voice comes out as an angry hiss.

"Sagestar, what is the meaning of this?"

"None of your business," Sagestar spits instantly, with no hesitation, tail flicking, "I was just leaving. And you should too, because she's 'not having visitors.'" Flickerfire looks to Smoothpearl, and her wide eyes are hard and cold. She shakes her head slightly, gaze locked onto the retreating Sagestar.

"Smoothpearl," Flickerfire almost whispers to his sister as Sagestar tail tip disappears out of the den, "...Are the kits okay? They're...louder." Smoothpearl finally peels her gaze away from Sagestar's previous spot, but her eyes search her kits instead. Flickerfire backs away to give her space, hoping nothing is physically wrong.

"I'm angry," Smoothpearl sighs, "Remember being a kit? If Aloestar was angry, we were even angrier." Flickerfire nods, breathing out a puff of air. He doesn't press, he doesn't ask about Sagestar, he just peers at the four wriggling bodies, little pink mouths pressing out shrill little mews.

"I know their names," Smoothpearl is suddenly smiling, eyes full of motherly love, "The reddish one, that's almost brown, is Rustkit. The little tortie tom there, my smallest, is Mallardkit. Mallard's twin, here, the one with the white spot on his nose, is Snailkit. And this kit here, the white one with little black spots, is Myrtlekit. She's the only she-cat."

"They're perfect," Flickerpaw purrs, crouching down beside his sister. To his relief, her tail falls away, allowing the kits to flop down and sprawl across the mossy sheet. The little pinkish paw of Myrtlekit reaches out as she yawns and stretches, eyes closed and

her jaw making little clicking noises as it closes. She's so cute, so precious, and Flickerfire dissolves into a smiling bundle. This moment is perfect.

"She's lucky, to have so many brothers," Flickerfire comments, nudging the little black-headed kit towards her littermates. The she-kit squeals indignantly. Smoothpearl and Flickerfire laugh together, softly as to not disturb the dozing kits.

"She is," Smoothpearl nods, giving her she-kit a lick, "I was worried I'd have a big litter, earlier, but...it seems just like a blessing now." Smoothpearl is suddenly frowning, looking thoughtful. "I'm worried though, Flickerfire. I can see it in Sagestar's eyes, ya know?"

"See what?" Flickerfire asks instantly, tail intertwining with Smoothpearl's for comfort, "Did he try to hurt you? Did he tell you anything?"

"No...no. Not really but I swear he's dangerous. I don't know why or how or..." Smoothpearl trails off, a thick worry in her eyes. "I know I can't protect my kits forever but he just reminds me so much of Snapstar." Smoothpearl sighs, and Flickerfire gives the she-cat a reassuring lick.

"You're right to worry," Flickerfire says cautiously, "I do too, sometimes, but I try not to. He's done nothing wrong-"

"Yet," Smoothpearl gives her daughter a quick lick, "But...there's always something on my mind." The she-cat looks almost nervous, guilty, as if she'd done something wrong. She hadn't. Flickerfire is almost sure of it.

"What?"

"Well...It's just...Obviously Snapstar didn't really like me, or care for me that much but...I loved him. So much. He never hurt me, either. He never really hurt *anyone* in front of me. It's hard to hate him so much when I never saw him hurting. Same with Voidflicker. It's hard to love him, even if I technically should, when he's done nothing but hurt. It's...awful." Flickerfire lets her finish, even though he itches to interrupt, to ensure the she-cat that he feels the same

sometimes.

"Family is chosen, not just...there," Flickerfire says after a long thoughtful pause, "You chose Yewmist. You can pick who you choose, sis." The tom licks his sister between the ears, and she pulls away, face looking conflicted. Flickerfire scoots away to give the she-cat some space, trying to soften his eyes a little more.

"And if you don't choose Sagestar, that's okay."

Chapter 39-

Sagestar is careful not to bite the prey too hard as he trots to the nursery, eyes scanning over an excited Sapkit and Cricketkit. Sapkit is bouncing up and down, grinning, and Cricketkit is smiling nervously. He's been way more reclusive lately, for good reason, but Sagestar has tried to be nice to the kits. Today is their apprentice ceremony, well Sapkit's apprentice ceremony. Cricketkit...not so much. But it isn't Sagestar's fault. If the dumb kit hadn't followed Sagestar...it isn't his fault. It's Cricketkit's.

"Hey," Sagestar mumbles through the prey, setting the little mouse down gently, "this is for Cricketkit. I snapped at him, he should have this. It's pretty big, do you think since it was found toward the two-leg's place it's a bit plumper?" Fringestrike narrows her eyes.

"Only for Cricketkit?" the she-cat says skeptically, slowly reaching for the prey, "Why?"

"Because I snapped at him," Sagestar says, turning his head to the side, "Does he not like mice?"

"He does," Fringestrike blinks in confusion, "I'll...I'll bring it to him. Thanks." Fringestrike still looks cautious, but she gently takes the mouse in her jaws and disappears into the nursery.

Sagestar has won again.

The tom was only lying about a few things. Not that many. That makes it better, right? Sure, the mouse was found normally in the forest. Sagestar would know; he'd caught it, come back with it, and made sure he'd boasted to every cat about finding it at the two-leg place, making sure he'd have an alibi. But there was one thing that was found near the two-leg place. The death berries. Or, more specifically, the seeds. Whole death berries would be caught, and Sagestar couldn't have that, but the seeds were the poisonous part. The seeds were the ones inside of the mouse.

Poor Cricketkit.

Sagestar retreats into his den with a wave of his tail. Everything is going perfectly. Everything. He'll come out to probably panicked wails or whatever, and Fringestrike would blame him, but that's okay. The two-legs must've poisoned the mouse. After all, it was moving kind of slowly. So, clueless Sagestar had just wanted to give a gift to Cricketkit, an apology. The worst apology ever.

Sagestar sits and waits, grooming his short pelt. He is almost purring with pleasure. The tom is not surprised when he hears the camp start to pick up, a few urgent mews, and the pitter-patter of paws on sandy ground.

Sagestar waltzes out of his den, concern-laced eyes searching the camp. Most of the warriors are already ready for the apprentice's ceremony, so no sun-rise patrol has gone out. But now Sagestar wishes he'd just sent the warriors out. Each warrior's ears are pricked, including Sagestar's, yet all he can hear are hushed whispers of gossip and the panicked taps of the medicine cat's feet. Both Flickerfire and Tumblecry are clearly in the nursery, and Sagestar thinks he should be too.

Sagestar jumps down from the stone ledge, pelt rippling with unease. Is it starting already? The berries sure work fast. The tom trots, no, runs, to the nursery, tail flicking nervously. Inside he can hear pained grunts and tiny yowls. Stomach pains. To be expected. Hopefully, though, Tumblecry can't get him to vomit up the poison.

Sagestar stands at the nursery's entrance, trying to peer in, looking panicked. "What's...What's going on?" Flickerfire stops to look at Sagestar, his gaze burning through the tom with pure disdain.

"What was in that mouse, Sagestar," the tom questions coldly, his voice edging on furious, "Something was in that mouse, and I thought you'd know, since *you fed it to him."* Sagestar tries to look surprised, but feels a little flustered.

"I don't... I just caught it..."

"Where? Where did you catch it?" Flickerfire demands, "Don't you

dare lie to me."

"Just the two leg place...where I hunt a lot...Could that be it?" Sagestar asks anxiously, fiddling with his paws, "What can we do?" Cricketkit's tiny, pitiful, grunts and wails sound from the nursery, and Flickerfire only growls.

"I don't know. Tumblecry's getting yarrow, but...it could be too late. Hear that? His wails, getting smaller? He'll die, Sagestar. And it's your fault," Flickerfire snarls, turning and racing towards the medicine cat's den, fur bristling. Sagestar stands stupidly, not knowing what to do except listen. Flickerfire is right; Cricketkit's little wails turn into whimpers, and Sagestar feels almost bad. But then again, his reputation, his life, could be ruined. And that can't happen.

Sagestar waits impatiently for the kit to die. Tumblecry and Flickerfire toil, trying desperately to save the kit. All Sagestar can do is listen until the Cricketkit's cries die down and Fringestrike's cries rise, echoing through camp. The whole camp goes silent except for Fringestrike, the early stages of grief setting in. Sagestar tries to look remorseful, scared, almost, but it's hard.

Eventually, Sagestar is forced to retreat to his den. He sits, deflated, in his nest. Now his reputation has taken a small hit, but over all, it's safe. Still, why does it feel so wrong?

Oh well.

The orange and white tom saunters out from his den, the mid-day sun sweltering. The big ball of fire blinds Sagestar momentarily, and he blinks to clear his gaze, eyes narrowed to let in the least light possible. "All..." Sagestar makes his voice crack very convincingly, and he gulps some air in, "All cats old enough to...catch their own prey...join us at the High Ledge for a clan meeting."

Cats slowly trickle from their dens, eyes wide and concerned and mouths whispering. Sagestar scans his clan, scans the worried eyes and bristling fur. He is concerned for them, yes. The tom hopes he hasn't upset them, he hopes none of his clanmates were particularly

close to the kits. "Today we lost a valuable life. Cricketkit ate a mouse that I....gave him," Sagestar pauses to let the gasps and angry comments subside, "It was caught by the two-leg place, and it was moving a bit slow so...it could have been poisoned and I didn't notice and-" Sagestar stops to make a choking sound, like a gulping swallow. "It's my fault. I'm so...sorry."

Comments break out, most quiet and soft but others louder, expressing their approval at the apology. Some say it isn't his fault. Some say it is. Some just look broken. Sagestar just stands until he can find some words. "No one is permitted to hunt *anywhere* near the two leg place. What if this happens again?" The clan yells their approval and their fear, filling Sagestar with accomplishment. They trust him.

They forgive him.

"We shall hold vigil tonight, at dusk. For now, all of us should rest. Cricketkit will always be cherished. Our tiny warrior," Sagestar says solemnly. The clan breaks out in sad cheers, eyes droopy and down-cast and voices sad and quiet.

"Cricketkit! Cricketkit!"

Sagestar stands, eyes locking onto Tumblecry, who holds a tiny brown shape. Cricketkit. The whole clan shuffles out of the way, tiny gasps and little cries rippling through the crowd. The sadness is contagious, for all except for Sagestar. The tom watches, feeling emotionless as the tiny kit's body is dropped. Sapkit trails behind, her eyes wide and her fur puffed out. She doesn't cry, doesn't blink, doesn't wail, she just stares, clearly in shock. Flickerfire whisks the kit away.

Sagestar feels nothing.

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The night sky is navy blue, dotted with bright pricks of light. Sagestar feels uneasy. If Aloestar's tales about each star being a Starclan cat, he isn't quite sure they all approve of him right now. But one cat clearly does. Lacewing.
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The vigil has already started, the atmosphere heavy with grief. Fringestrike is the first to wail over her son, crying and tainting the kit's cold body with salty tears. Sagestar simply licks the kit, saying he could've been a strong warrior. Could've. If he wasn't so nosy.

Next is little Sapkit, her usually bright yellowish color muted to blank gray to match the feeling in the air. She places a carefully woven moss ball next to her brother, murmuring something inaudible in the little tom's ears. The little she-kit blinks down at her brother, better composed than the rest of the cats. Sagestar notes in his brain that he wants to be her mentor. *So emotionless, like that, and she'll be a strong warrior.*

Sagestar watches cats filter back to their den to rest and think about their ruined day. Some cats murmur about the whole season being a punishment from Starclan. Aloestar's death, Cricketkit's death, the tainted prey. What could be worse? Hopefully things can get better with the leaf-change. It's green-leaf now, thank Starclan, and the prey is plentiful. The heat is strong, sure, but that's just a small price to pay. So is this kit's death. After that, every cat will be okay. It's all fine.

Finally all that's left is the patiently waiting elders, frail Branchheart and snappy Quailflinch watching the poor kit with sorrow. Sagestar looks awkwardly at the pair.

"Do you guys...uh...need help?" The tom asks quietly, silently hoping they won't take his offer. They don't. Instead they shake their head in sync, Branchheart with a sad smile. Quailflinch looks almost immune to sadness.

"We've buried many cats, Sagestar. No, but thank you for the offer," Quailflinch says levelly, her eyes cold as she approaches the tiny kit, "You can rest now. We've got this." Sagestar nods awkwardly, stepping back clumsily and stumbling. Branchheart nods at Sagestar as Quailflinch scoops up Cricketkit in her mouth. The kit's brown tail touches the ground, a sad reminder of what could've been if the tom had been allowed to continue his life.

But he hadn't.

The clan should simply move on.

Sagestar retreats like receding water into his den, the night thick with darkness. The blanket of darkness is warm, humid, almost, and the crickets sing a loud and unsavory tune. Sagestar feels trapped, alone, but he also feels reinvigorated. And if feeling alone and empty also comes with strength, he'll take it any day.

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hi!! sorry, not sure this chapter added that much but it...was here!! definitely not my favorite, but it was okay!! I hope you enjoyed it, also sorry no Flickerfire POV this time!!):
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Chapter 40-

Sagestar stirs as bright light cuts into his den, dancing behind his dark eyelids. The tom can barely hang onto his dreams as the roar of urgent footsteps and cautious snarls break out. The smell that basks over Sagestar is familiar, almost safe, but also screaming of danger. The tom rushes to his paws, tail lashing as he presses toward the morning light and out of his den.

The size of his clan has doubled. Well, not really. His clan is the same size, but there are more cats added to them. Sagestar surveys the cats. Half of them are wet, smelling of the river and aquatic plants. Their eyes are wide and scared, pelts bristling and chests heaving. They'd clearly been sprinting.

"What is the meaning of this?" Sagestar tries to sound intimidating, scanning the Riverclan cats. The crowd goes silent, the atmosphere quiet and uncomfortable. Riverclan is noticeably smaller, queens and most kits. Only one apprentice is present, one that twists Sagestar's heart almost painfully. Echokit. No, Echopaw, holding a tiny little black furred, green eyed, kit. The little one has wide eyes and a fearful expression carved onto his youth face. Sagestar doesn't really feel bad for the kit, but as he scans the crowd, he sees why he should be. The only expecting queen had been Pondscour. She's gone, not with her clan, at least, and Sagestar guesses she might be dead.

As the tom surveys the rest of Riverclan, he realizes many cats are gone. Weedfrown is missing from the crowd, along with Wavepaw and Eddysnap. Sagestar's eyes harden as he realizes something awful must've happened. Really awful. Beside Pondscour and the three others, many others have deep scratches and heaving chests.

Turtlesplash emerges from the crowd, her eyes tired and her sides battered with claw marks. Had something attacked their camp? Before Sagestar can assume, Turtlesplash speaks.

"Windclan has attacked our camp," the she-cat looks exhausted, her

calico pelt bristles, and she spits out, "They said something about Voidflicker wanting this. This has something to do with *you,* doesn't it?" Her voice is accusatory, which Sagestar doesn't quite appreciate, but she has a point. She isn't really *wrong,* after all.

"Are you asking for a place to stay?" Sagestar deflects the question with a subtle, almost unnoticeable, flick of his tail. Turtlesplash's eyes harden further. Sagestar almost rolls his eyes. Why is she so hostile? Sagestar could easily kick them into the forest, but the desperation in Echopaw's eyes...perhaps he won't.

Then an idea reaches Sagestar's mind.

"Turtlesplash, did any of your cats die in the attack?" Sagestar asks smoothly, scanning the Riverclan cats. Pain flashes in Echopaw's eyes as he gently sets the kit, who cowers, down. The kit must be confused and scared. Isn't that what he wants these cats to be, however? That means they'll be willing to do many things, *anything,* for help. Sagestar almost smiles at the idea.

"Yes," Turtlesplash answers cautiously, "they went for the nursery. They managed to kill Pondscour and her kits. But, as is quite *obvious,* Webkit made it." So the mewling kit is named 'Webkit.' Alright. Sagestar doesn't really care to know.

"The nursery?" Sagestar is a little irritated, not at the nursery attack, but at Windclan's motive, so it's easy to sound angry, "But the code says-"

"We know what the code says!" Swanscreech, an all white sleek-furred she-cat, her irritation palpable in the air. Sagestar bristles.

"Yes, but clearly Windclan doesn't," Sagestar says loudly, echoing his voice through camp, "Windclan must learn that their code-breaking behavior *will not* be tolerated. This means war."

The clan explodes, voices blurring together and lips moving angrily. Sagestar doesn't care what they think, not really. He's already decided. In fact, he's already decided on *many things.* He's decided where Smoothpearl's kit will go, that there will be a war, and that he'll somehow be a father. All of the things work in harmony, their

connections only seen by Sagestar.

But that's okay.

The clan slowly grows silent, quiet bristling forms taking up the crowd. Sagestar frowns. He hasn't won them yet. They're still protesting.

"We have lost so much already," Turtlesplash says calmly, "Will we really risk losing?"

"No, we won't," Sagestar can't hold back the snarl creeping into his voice, "Two clans against one? Do you really think we can risk losing?" Sagestar knows he is right. The she-cat is frankly being unreasonable, he thinks, annoyed. Honestly, how could any cat think the scrawny rabbit-lickers could win any war?

"You don't know that!" Fringestrike's enraged voice sounds, traveling up to Sagestar's ears, "Cricketkit is already...-"

"Enough. We've practically already won the war, and anyone that argues can talk to me privately," Sagestar manages to growl out, anger and determination coursing through him, "Riverclan, for now you can stay in the camp. I'll figure this out eventually."

The clan very gradually slows down. The bustle of Sagestar's angry clanmates slow, and Sagestar is left in the almost-silence of the early morning, sitting silently in the dew-laden grass. His eyes scan the camp diligently. The Riverclan cats stick to their clanmates, talking in low whispers and tiny, minuscule glances to Sagestar. He doesn't like it, but what can he do? For now he keeps to himself, silent and watching.

"Um. Sage...star?"

The voice is tiny, so small and cautious Sagestar almost misses it. Echopaw, wide eyed with the tiny black kit that looks exactly like her late mother at his tiny paws. Sagestar blinks in acknowledgement, hoping his annoyance can't be read on his face. Why are they here? Can't they just find a nursing she-cat, like Smoothpearl, to take the scrap?

"Yes?" Sagestar says, looking at Echopaw sideways. The tom is very clearly nervous, his eyes shifting from the kit to Sagestar. The tom must be at least almost a warrior, yet he is tiny and skinny, like he hasn't eaten in a while. Sagestar almost tsks. Riverclan cats are supposed to be slick and well-fed, but not Echopaw.

"Um...well..." Echopaw stammers, cheeks flushing with embarrassment, "Who is...Who did..." The tom swallows a pool of saliva, his body language screaming nervousness. "When I was young, I had a sister and...Someone in Thunderclan saved me but Blossomkit didn't..."

"I know," Sagestar cuts in, his face softening an octave, "I was there."

"It was you?" Echopaw's face brightens, "You're good with-"

"Not exactly," Sagestar says a little pointedly, but he isn't quite completely sure why, "Hey, that kit should stay with Smoothpearl. How old is she?" Webkit blinks, her big green eyes glossing over with pure, unhindered, sadness. Her gaze is not directed at Echopaw or Sagestar, but the cloudless forest sky that hangs over Thunderclan camp. At second glance, actually, she seems to not be scanning the cats, but the camp. This must be so unfamiliar to her.

"I'm right here," Webkit looks down from the sky, her eyes cold and her voice like her mother's, "Don't talk about me like I'm not here." Her voice is snappy, directed at Echopaw and Sagestar at the same time. Sagestar is almost surprised; her voice is squeaky but also strong and opinionated.

"Of course," Sagestar answers with a smile. He knows how kits like this work. He was one of them, after all. "How old are you?"

"Three. Three moons."

"Oh, halfway, are we? Nice. Smoothpearl's are only half a moon old, though. They can't play yet," Sagestar says slowly, cautiously, keeping his voice calm and not like he is speaking to a kit, "Is that alright?" Echopaw eyes Webkit cautiously, wrapping his tail protectively around her. Webkit bats it away with a deadly glare.

"I don't play," the kit says quietly, a bit of pride flashing in her eyes, "I'm too old for playing. I'll just practice battle moves all day." The she-cat's eyes go downcast, staring at her paws with the sadness thick in the air. Sagestar frowns, walking a few paces forward. The she-kit tenses up, claws coming out protectively. Sagestar pauses.

"No kit is too old to play," the tom says calmly, voice smooth and unyielding, "Soon those kits will be a moon old, and they'll be out of the nursery. And you'll play with them, okay?" The thought thrills Sagestar. Soon he'll see Smoothpearl's kits. She can't hide them forever. He'll see the smallest soon, the most cowardly one, but for now he'll be patient. That'll be enough.

Webkit's little teeth bare, but all she looks like is a wet river rat, not scary at all. "You can't-"

"Echopaw, I'll take her to meet Smoothpearl and her kits," Sagestar says, barely glancing at the apprentice, "If that's alright."

"Webkit?" Echopaw asks cautiously. Webkit frowns at Sagestar with a flick of her abnormally long tail. Her fur is stuck up and bristling, but her eyes are soft, considering. Sagestar doesn't try to look inviting. Kits may look mouse-brained, no, they are, but they are sure observant. Sagestar knows they are. He remembers being much smaller, tiny, even, a kit, and watching the tiny flickers of emotion in Snapstar's eyes or the subtle flicks of tails when Sagestar had asked annoying questions. Sagestar knows to not change his face at all, to make it positively unreadable, and his eyes should be even colder. No love, no hate, no annoyance. Just his face.

"F-Fine...is Slickpearl nice?" Sagestar offers a tiny smile.

"Smoothpearl. And she's-"

"Same thing," Webkit grumbles, clearly annoyed. Sagestar chuckles.

"She's like you, in a way."

"She's a grown-up. She can't be like me."

"Sure she can."

Echopaw is still very anxious as Webkit hesitantly follows Sagestar through the crowd. The tom is careful not to lose the tiny kit in the sea of cats, but the she-cat sticks almost fearfully to the tom's side, eyes darting from cat to cat.

"Nervous?" Sagestar asks casually, not caring to glance at Webkit. Webkit's little scoff sounds from a little below Sagestar.

"What do you know?"

"It's easy to get sympathy when you're a kit," Sagestar ignores her ill-temper, "Remember that." The tom can't help but flick his tail, but it doesn't add much but his clear annoyance.

"And what does *that* mean?" the kit's voice is loud and squeaky, and as Sagestar weaves through cats, he contemplates losing her and then finding her again, just to teach her a lesson. But no. That'd probably make her even snappier. *Ugh. Kits are...something.*

"It *means* you should be nice to Smoothpearl, if you wish to stay with her. She's kind, but you can't push her around. Also, make yourself look small, pathetic. Stay still, and make your fur fluffed up and spiked. Talk quietly," Sagestar feels weird, coaching her on how to get into a queen's brain, but Snapstar had taught him early, and he'd been fine. She'll be fine too.

"So..." Webkit pauses, staring at the crack in stone which is the nursery, "Like this?" The she-cat vigorously licks her fur, but instead of down, it flies up in clumps. The she-kit even hooks a leaf in her tiny claws and places it in her clumpy tangle of fur. Sagestar smiles in approval, surveying the kit slowly. He nods.

"Yeah. You're a natural, ya know? Now say you tried to groom yourself but couldn't because you don't know how," Sagestar says with another nod, "Okay?" Webkit, for the first time, drops a tiny smile.

"Got it."

The two cats slip quickly into the nursery, Webkit going after Sagestar. The nursery is dim and quiet, silent except for the soft

mews of the sleeping kits in Smoothpearl's paws. Sagestar regards each kit with a lack of interest, eyes cold and voice devoid of anything meaningful.

Smoothpearl lets out a tiny hiss, eyes flashing with anger. "Sagestar, I've told yo-"

"I know," Sagestar snaps irritably, "Starclan, the world doesn't revolve around you. You know Riverclan's here, correct? Fringestrike told you?" Smoothpearl narrows her eyes.

"Sure...why?"

"Windclan. I'm sure you can figure it out from there," Sagestar locks eyes with the she-cat, feeling an unexpected dart of kinship. They had gone through it together, hadn't they? They shared the same father. The same memories, more or less. So doesn't that mean...

No. They are the furthest from family. All they share is blood.

"There's a kit left. Her name is Webkit. Could you...take her? She eats solid prey." Webkit stiffly walks from behind Sagestar, clearly pretending to cower. Sagestar almost smirks.

The she-kit does look small, pitiful, even. Webkit is shivering in fear, green eyes widened into two large circles with her pupils dilated so much the green is almost pushed out. Her whole body is vibrating, her tail puffed out and curling around her chest as she cowers. If Sagestar didn't know better, he might believe this kit is actually terrified. She definitely looks like it, with her spiked up fur and pressed back ears.

"Oh..." Smoothpearl regards the kits with soft eyes, "H-Hello...little one." A little dart of annoyance flashes in Webkit's eyes, but she stomps it quickly.

"Hi," the she-kit nearly whispers, "S-sorry I'm...messy...I tried to groom, I did, but I...dunno how." Smoothpearl frowns, now clearly noticing the knots and tangles entrapping the she-cat's fur.

"Come here," Smoothpearl beckons the she-kit with a flick of her tail, "I'll try to see what I can do for those tangles but... I don't know

about much else." Sagestar's face contorts with surprise and a tad bit of anger. She isn't taking her? But the kit had been perfect, amazing, really, and yet...It didn't work?

Webkit creeps closer cautiously, jumping as Smoothpearl scoops her into her paws and starts to lick and nip at the she-cat's fur. Smoothpearl mumbles words into Webkit's ears, and the black she-kit seemingly calms, tail smoothing down. Sagestar cocks his head to the side, ears pricked in interest . *What's happening? Can she take her or not...?*

Eventually, Webkit pulls away from Smoothpearl. "Who was it?" Sagestar pricks his ears, but he gets no response. Smoothpearl only shrugs, smiling slyly.

"You're always welcome here, Webkit. Remember that." Webkit dips her head, a true smile spreading across her muzzle.

"Okay."

Webkit prances over to Sagestar, tail curled at the end. "She said I wouldn't fit in the nest. But Fringestrike could take me. Is she lying?" Sagestar's eyes flash with anger, and Webkit clearly notices. But so does Smoothpearl, and she talks faster.

"I have four kits, Sagestar. And Sapkit is closer in age to her. Plus, Fringestrike might-"

"Fringestrike is grieving," Sagestar snaps, his teeth bared almost painfully, "Are you *trying* to take her somewhere she isn't wanted?" Smoothpearl rolls her eyes.

"Believe it or not, Sagestar, Fringestrike is a good cat. She's kind. Not to you, clearly, but she is," Smoothpearl says sassily, "If she doesn't take her, shame on me, but otherwise...it'll be fine. Watch." Webkit looks confused, her head cocked to the side and her ears sticking up to catch the conversation. Sagestar lowers his voice a few octaves.

"Sure. If you're wrong, though, what will we do then?" Sagestar asks angrily, his tail flicking. Smoothpearl's eyes harden, her mouth

frowning. The she-cat sighs.

"I don't know, but I'll find something." Sagestar rolls his eyes.

"Sure you will," the tom turns to the little black she-kit, "Come on, Webkit. We'll find Fringestrike." Webkit frowns in confusion, her little tail sweeping nervously.

"Who's Fringestrike? Did her kits die?" Sagestar feels almost bad, but he pushes the feeling away.

"Only one. She still has a she-kit but...she's practically an apprentice," Sagestar pauses, shooting a sharp, pointed, glance at Smoothpearl, "Hopefully she'll let you stay."

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hi!! hope you enjoyed the extra long chapter!!

I hoped you enjoyed sage being semi-normal too. he does have feelings (a shocker!! :o) have a good night/day!! thanks for reading, you're awesome!!
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Chapter 41-

Warning: mild mentions of suicide, not intended.

Flickerfire feels mud coating his paws, the scent of rot thick on his tongue. The breeze in the Dark Forest is almost non-existent, yet somehow the scent of suffering and iron coats the murky world.

Flickerfire scans the place, eyes wide. He isn't dead, so someone must be here to meet him.

Flickerfire isn't as terrified of this place as he should be. By default, he'll be banished here, right? He hasn't exactly...welcomed Starclan in the last few moons, had he? In fact, he'd seen Mantisstar and Funnelstar many times in the past few nights. He'd woken in the Dark Forest a few nights in a row, Mantisstar and Funnelstar ready to speak, but Flickerpaw had closed his eyes and fallen back into the dark black void of sleep. Real, dreamless sleep.

Flickerfire could do that now, but this is different. Mantisstar and Funnelstar are missing, and the only thing left is the murky, dim-lit, terrain.

The tom is confused.

The whisps of wind pull Flickerfire's pelt gently, and the tom blinks at the dark terrain. Okay. What now?

"A murderer..." Flickerfire freezes, cold uneasiness seeping into his bones. The tom freezes, ears straining to hear. He can't. The wind is silent, the rotting trees sitting still. Flickerfire knows he heard something, he won't deny that, but *what,* exactly? Flickerfire pricks his ears, waiting.

"...hiding behind a holy title..."

Flickerfire pauses. He knows this message. The memories of death, of the lack of air, of the icy cold water seeping into his fur, all rush

back like Riverclan's river. The voice continues faster, louder, than before.

"One that cannot be shaken..."

Flickerfire knows the next line.

"A path that cannot falter..."

Flickerfire feels a recognition blossom inside him, a certainty that wasn't there before. How could he be so oblivious to such an obvious omen?

"He cannot be fixed..."

The voice is loud, demanding, chasing away all the doubt Flickerfire has instilled in his mind.

"Only killed."

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Flickerfire wakes in his nest, eerily cold. Tumblecry's nose touches his spine, even in the darkness. It's been a nervous habit, Flickerfire supposes. The tom used to wake up with dreams of Aloestar, unidentified claws tearing her throat open, and he wake sobbing and wailing. Tumblecry had stayed close, her nose a constant comfort, unwavering support amidst the shadows of depression.

The night is cold and dark, a blanket of uneasiness wrapped around camp. The smell of Riverclan cats is sharp and almost disgusting, but the smell of blood and injury is way worse. The cats had flocked to the medicine cat's den, and now the den was overflowed with sloppily patched up cats. Thunderclan doesn't have the herbs for this, and Flickerfire had mostly been in the forest yesterday, searching for any herbs or cobwebs he could find. Thank Starclan it's green leaf, however, and the herbs weren't hard to find, but still.

Flickerfire doesn't quite have the energy to leave his nest, his eyes pinned to the many injured sleeping cats. In his mind, he imagines many more bodies, not just sleeping. Their bodies, leaking blood,
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their eyes, open and frozen. At the top of it all, grinning ear to ear, is Sagestar.

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Sagestar wakes in the morning with the smell of Webkit, fishy and river-smelling, coating the den. The tom blinks his green eyes open, seeing a familiar black shape blended with the dim light. A pair of little dark green eyes stare down at Sagestar, almost unnervingly so.

"W-Webkit?" Sagestar stammers sleepily, eyes cracking open, "You're supposed to be sleeping with Fringestrike?" The meeting had worked, to Sagestar's surprise, and Webkit had settled in Fringestrike's nest, Sapkit comfortingly lapping at the black she-kit's ears. Sagestar had thought it was over; the kits and queen looked comfortable enough, not being hostile whatsoever. Even now Webkit doesn't look scared or unnerved, just stoic, with her head raised high.

"I know."

"So why-"

"Cause it's *cold* in the nursery! Why'd you abandon me there?" Webkit huffs sassily, sitting on her flicking tail, "Let me sleep here." Sagestar narrows his eyes.

"No. You can't sleep in here unless you're my kit," the thought sparks something in Sagestar, but he shoos the feeling away. No. His successor *can't* be a she-kit. He'd have to find another kit. Not Webkit though, the snappy she-kit who sounds just a bit too much like Smoothpearl. He'd find another kit. Sometime. Right now, he can't get too attached to Webkit.

Is the kit already too attached to me?

"Well-" Webkit starts, her head held high.

"Don't lie to me. It isn't cold in the nursery. It's *green leaf.* It's warm, especially if you share a nest. Go back, Webkit," Sagestar flicks his tail, *"Now."* Webkit huffs, tail flicking and talk bristling. Her little
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teeth are bared. Sagestar stares back, eyes cold and dangerous. The she-kit turns with a tiny growl. Her tail disappears through the crack in stone.

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Flickerfire hates the cold feeling in his chest that weighs his whole body down. His body is raging in heat, the green leaf sun only making it worse and worse, melting Flickerfire's fluffy fur. He wants to leave, to walk to the river and drink, drink, drink, until his stomach is as heavy as the tom's head feels.

Flickerfire is sick.

"Drink this," Tumblecry instructs, pushing the ball of moss towards Flickerfire. It drips with water, dampening the stone ground. Flickerfire almost recoils. He'll puke.

"N-No. C-Can I move to the back of the den? I'm burning..."

"It's not very hot out, Flickerfire," Tumblecry's eyes are swamped with worry, "Drink. You should know you need it." Flickerfire's brain says he should drink, Starclan, he'd wanted to drink river water just seconds ago! But as he smells the fresh scent of moss, his stomach heaves and he wants to throw up it's contents on the stone. He holds back.

"Starclan, the *medicine cat* is getting sick, we're all going to die," Flickerfire hears a cat mutter, and a few others murmur in agreement. The white tom turns to stare at the injured cats, but he can't use anymore of his energy to think of a retort, so he shrinks into his nest with a wince of pure anguish.

"Not drinking, Tumblecry...use it on..." Flickerfire trails off to suck up more air, glaring at the moss ball of water like it'd been the one to kill Aloestar. The thought hurts Flickerfire and also makes him want to laugh. They don't know what had slaughtered Aloestar yet but it sure wasn't the river water.

"Starclan, Flickerfire. You think you know what it takes to feel better, being a *fully trained* medicine cat, but let me refresh you. It
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takes liquids and rest. Full stomachs. So pick one. Drink until you're full or eat until you're full. Which one?" Tumblecry is clearly losing patience, her pelt bristling. Under the clear annoyance in Tumblecry's eyes, Flickerfire can see the concern rocketing through them too.

"Well," Flickerfire mutters. She's right, but that doesn't mean he has to like it. "Um. W-Water." The prey would make him puke solids up, way worse than just water. Flickerfire tentatively sticks his tongue out, slowly slurping up it's liquid. The water is cool and refreshing, and the tom almost appreciates it. Almost. He appreciates the liquids until they come streaming from his jaws.

Gross.

He was right.

Tumblecry frowns. "Well hopefully some of it went down," she hums thoughtfully, turning to look at the rapidly brightening sky, "It'll be a nice day at least." Nice day? Flickerfire feels like the sun is pure lava, rays of heat specifically targeting his pelt. The tom shoots a glare at Tumblecry for daring to say that. Sure, she can't feel the pure fire beneath his skin, but still. She should know.

"Tum...Tumblecry?" A small voice squeaks timidly, and Tumblecry turns her gaze quickly to a frail looking apprentice. The tom evokes a sharp pang of emotion within Flickerfire, so he turns his head and shuts his eyes. Flickerfire remembers the tiny, happy, words of Echokit right before Sagestar had arrived to see little motionless Blossomkit.

"We're here!"

Flickerfire winces as Echokit, no, he must be Echopaw by now, keeps on talking. "May I...take a walk to the nursery? I need to...to make sure Webkit is okay," the tom asks politely, "Please." Flickerfire flattens his ears, the memories flooding back. The river's wet sand had swallowed that poor kit, and now Flickerfire is about to swallow her brother. *Shut. Up.*

It's not fair, not really, to hate the tom's voice, or even think of him

lowly because of the memories he shares with Flickerfire, but the tom can't help it.

"Oh. Sure," Tumblecry nods, casting a confused look at Flickerfire's agitated stance, "I'm sure she's alright, though." Echopaw nods, his fur bristling. It's constantly that way. Is that was death does to a cat. Flickerfire can relate, so he nods to the tom. Echopaw's eyes flash with recognition, and he smiles slowly. He knows, and so does Flickerfire.

"I know you're sick but...can you come?" Echopaw suddenly asks, his eyes hopeful and his face smooth. Tumblecry frowns slightly.

"Well-"

"I can try," Flickerfire draws his aching body up, shaking moss off his pelt. His vision is blurred and his head is definitely about to explode, but he still stands. Tumblecry places a supporting tail on the tom's back.

"Lay down," the gray she-cat orders sternly. Flickerfire frowns. Well, it's more like a stubborn pout, but the tom does not fold under Tumblecry's smooth voice.

"I don't... I'm fine, Tumblecry, really," the tom mutters, stretching his painful joints, "You're not my *mommy."* Echopaw looks uncomfortable as Tumblecry bristles at the sharp insult.

"You'll get some cat sick," the she-cat says slowly, angrily, "You could get your *nieces and nephews* sick." Flickerfire flicks his tail dismissively.

"I won't even look at anyone too hard," the tom says with a roll of his eyes, "It'll be okay." Tumblecry huffs, her eyes dangerous.

"Rest. It'll do you good," the she-cat says firmly, "Echopaw, I'm sure Flickerfire-"

"I'm going," Flickerfire snarls, annoyed, pushing past Tumblecry to stand next to Echopaw. He's kept his promise, his eyes are trained on Tumblecry and not the tiny frail looking tom, and he is careful not to cough or sneeze or even *sniffle* while looking at the tom.

Tumblecry seems to still be seething, but she only lets out a tiny growl.

"Fine... I swear you get one of those kits sick it could be a death sentence, you know that?" the she-cat huffs. Flickerfire nods stiffly.

"They won't get sick."

"Hopefully."

Flickerfire feels weak and unstable but most of all he feels annoyed at his mentor. Who does she think she is? His mother? No, he has no mother now. So why must Tumblecry act like he's a naughty apprentice confined to camp?

Flickerfire sighs, flicking his tail at Echopaw. "Let's walk."

Flickerfire narrows his eyes at the bright sunlight pouring from the sky, looking down at his paws. Echopaw shuffles uncomfortably. Flickerfire is just uncomfortable, his head pounding and his legs wobbly like kit paws. Sickness over takes him, and Flickerfire just feels awful. His vision blurs. "Echopaw? What did you want to speak about?" Echopaw blinks.

"Um," the tom says slowly, "Were you...there at the fire?"

"Of course," Flickerfire says instantly, "Every cat was." His paws scuttle over the sandy ground of Thunderclan camp. He remembers it well, the pain, the grief over a kit he'd only spoken to once. The packed sand of the river, holding the she-kit's little tiny body. The closing of her eyes, the slowing of her breathing. The death.

"Can you...tell me... the story...with the tree...and the storm?"

Flickerfire doesn't know that one. That isn't right. He should know it, he should. For Blossomkit. Smoothpearl's kits should grow up knowing the tale. They should know it like Blossomkit does, up in Starclan. They should ask for it, like Blossomkit did, down on Earth.

Flickerfire will make sure of it.

"Well...yeah," Echopaw sighs. They're almost at the nursery, which is a few paces away. "But...I had a sister. Blossomkit. She died." The apprentice says it too clearly, no tears even threatening to spill over his eyes. Flickerfire finally looks at the tom, really looks, and he looks distant, sad but not *broken,* like he should be. "I don't remember her much, just...just playing moss ball and all." Echopaw suddenly stops, eyes narrowing as he stares ahead.

"She died first, but I paid for it."

Flickerfire flinches, and he now stares at Echopaw. He should feel angry, but curiosity burns beneath his skin. "Why...?"

"I was the one that got ignored by Pondscour because I 'wasn't like my sister.' I got screamed at for asking where 'my sissy' was. I was a kit. I didn't *know.* I didn't remember," Echopaw spits, "But I do remember you. You were crying. Why? You didn't know my sister. You didn't know me. You still don't. But you saved me. You tried to save her, at least."

Flickerfire blinks. Sure, he did. He doesn't know why he did it, not really, but he can guess. Why let kits die, if there was a way to stop it? In a way, did that mindset make him a good cat?

Probably not.

But there is also Pondscour. She must've been mad with grief, but that was, is, no excuse. No kit deserves that. In no circumstance. Flickerfire imagines a cowering Echokit, blood on Pondscour's paws, Echokit's tiny wince and whimper. And he can't stand it. He imagines Snapstar in Pondscour's place, Maplekit in Echokit's, Maplekit's big eyes wide, her mouth open, blood pouring from a cut on her throat. Way more gruesome.

Flickerfire feels like vomiting, and not only because of sickness.

"It isn't your fault, you know?" Echopaw says suddenly, green eyes blinking up at Flickerfire, "That Blossomkit died. She would've died anyways. She was small, you know? Weak, kind of. I think I loved her, though." Flickerfire feels validation, validation that he doesn't deserve, wash over him. Echopaw looks blank, not knowing his

words hurt and also feel amazing.

"Thanks," Flickerfire chokes out, and his head is suddenly pounding again, "Hey...I'm getting kinda dizzy so-"

"Yeah. I'll say hi to that other queen for you. Flicker... something, right?" Echopaw shrugs, like he doesn't really care all that much. Flickerfire envies his clear numbness so much.

"Yeah. Flickerfire."

"Okay," Echopaw looks almost happy, "Thanks for...everything. Though, you didn't need to save me that day. I think I'd be better off dead, ya know?" The tom doesn't sound sad, just like it's a fact, a truth.

"No you wouldn't," Flickerfire flicks a tail, leaving it at that, "Trust me."

I've died once. It's not fun.

Flickerfire pushes back through the crowd, head ducked and tears threatening to spill. His mind hurts, stuffed with thoughts and memories of pure pain and suffering.

Why me?

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well hope you enjoyed!! an extra long mostly flick chapter, to make up for the flickerfire deprivation!! do you guys think, regardless of either's actions, sage or flick has suffered more, and in what instances? I love to hear you guy's opinions!! (:
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Chapter 42-

Sounds of battle rage in Sagestar's ears, loud and exhilarating. His muscles move, burning with energy as he smashes his paw down on a small Windclan apprentice. He's never seen the small she-cat before, but she smells of Windclan, of hate, of mingled blood, so Sagestar fights her anyways.

It isn't a fair fight, Sagestar realizes relatively quickly. The Windclan cats hadn't expected the attack, clearly, their patrol small and surprised. Sagestar had brought three Riverclan cats with him, along with a normal patrol size of four cats, overpowering the Windclan cats seven to four. One of those four was an untrained apprentice, clearly panicked and stumbling around like a clueless kit. Sagestar isn't surprised. This is *easy*.

The tom moves fluidly, biting, kicking, *fighting.* Sagestar feels like he is meant to do this, to spill blood that, technically, is his too. But hopefully, all his scrapes have spilled all the blood he's shared with them.

"Sagesong."

The voice is cold, disconnected, and Sagestar wheels at the sound of his name. Well, part of it. The cat is calico-furred, her pelt matted with blood, her eyes a sad, deep blue. Sagestar flinches at the intensity of the she-cat's gaze. Lilypaw. Or something else.

"Sagestar. And it's you. Lily...paw?" Sagestar steps forward, fur bristling. Lilypaw draws back her lip.

"I thought Aloestar had better sense than to make *you* leader," the she-cat's tail tip flicks, her lips curled into a snarl. Sagestar flicks his tail. What has he done wrong to Lilypaw? He'd thought of her highly, for a Windclan cat.

"Aloestar doesn't trust *Windclan* cats."

"Bold of you to say. Considering you're *part* Windclan."

The battle pauses. Windclan cats stop hissing and yowling, claws still out-stretched and tails still puffed out threateningly. Thunderclan and Riverclan cats stare, some with jaws agape. Sagestar is in the middle of it all, his blood boiling with pure rage, but his face calm and proud.

Until it isn't.

Lilypaw clearly isn't expecting Sagestar to pounce on her, eyes widening as she falls with a sickening thump. Sagestar stares down at the she-cat, who wriggles like a worm with panicked screeches, under him. How many cats had Lilypaw told? She can't be allowed to tell anymore, that's for sure. Sagestar unsheathes his claws, surveying Lilypaw's face. Her pupils dilate, her mouth opening in a screech.

"No! I was *kind* to you, I *liked* you! I *saved* you! I didn't know that you killed Tan-" The she-cat's desperate voice is cut off with a sickening gurgle as the Sagestar sinks his claws into sensitive flesh. Sagestar wants to dig deeper, his anger controlling him now. But he can't. The tom is knocked off, sent sprawling into the dirt.

A pair of green eyes stares down, already glittering with tears. A pair Sagestar recognizes, but just barely. The pair of eyes is something from the past, something that Sagestar had seen from kit eyes. Something blurred in mystery, misery.

"You killed her! You killed Lilypatch!" The tom spits in Sagestar's face, "You knew what you were doing! You killed her...because you couldn't handle that she knew!" The tom's voice brings back so many memories, all mingled with a background of sadness. Sagestar snarls.

"Who are you?" The leader spits, knowing he could die at any moment. He doesn't want to die, not yet. Smoothpearl still has all four kits, he doesn't have a successor, and Sagestar has already decided he won't die like this. He puts his hind paws up to the tom's

stomach, ready to kick out.

"You don't *deserve* this, you don't deserve to say her name. You never did. Helping you was the worst decision of my life-" the cat's ramblings are cut off by and black and white blur, leaping, paws out-stretched, into the ginger tom. Suddenly the name comes back to Sagestar, loud and throbbing.

Foxpaw.

Isn't he a medicine cat, though?

Why is he here?

Sagestar scrambles to his paws, fur bristling and mouth curled into a snarl. His protector, who he had already decided was some cat like Frigidcall or Cedarmist, loyal and powerful Thunderclan members. His eyes turn to the small black and white blur, surprise flickering in his chest. The she-cat turns to Sagestar, blue eyes shining as her claws sink into Foxpaw's ginger fur. Sagestar is stunned for a millisecond, before instincts kick in.

"Get back to your border, Windclan," Sagestar announces into the crowd of Windclan cats, "Unless you wish to lose more cats." The last words come out as a growl, his claws coming out from their sheathes. The Windclan cats freeze at the threat, teeth bared and pelts bristling. The small apprentice eyes Lilypatch, horror clear on her face.

"What about Foxbounce?" The apprentice whispers breathlessly, her little paws fidgeting like two restless bees. A diluted tortoiseshell nods slowly, large green eyes wide. Sagestar glances at Foxbounce, and pride seeps into him. Pride he'd never expected to feel for his cousin.

Ivypaw.

Sagestar nods to the apprentice, and she steps away, teeth bared in a snarl. Foxbounce scrambles up, eyes wild and claws unsheathed. The tom bunches his muscles, teeth bared just like Ivypaw's, but the apprentice scrambles back, back arched threateningly. "I'll claw

your ears off. Go home, you coward." Foxbounce growls.

"I'm staying here," his voice is small, a mere whisper, "Here with..." The tom trails off, a sob escaping from him. Sagestar rolls his eyes. *Starclan, he's loud.*

Ivypaw's eyes flash with sadness, understanding, and she glances helplessly at Sagestar. The Thunderclan leader straightens up, puffing out his chest. "We'll bury her. It's only fair, after all." Screams of protest erupt from Windclan, cats leaping forward to scream that it *isn't* fair, that they'll take her back to where she was raised. Sagestar wants to roll his eyes again. He'll never understand these cats.

"I won't let you touch her!" Foxbounce lunges, eyes wild and crazy. Sagestar flies to the side, growling and hissing. He doesn't need to kill another cat today, but he will, he will, and Foxbounce should know that. Sagestar forces his fur to lie flat, and his tail to quit flicking.

"Fine, take that corpse and leave. Go back to your side of the border," Sagestar hisses, a smug smile slipping onto his face, "But, Foxbounce, I hope you know you've started a war." Foxbounce's eyes flicker with realization, with grief, and Sagestar feels almost glad. The tom turns away, eyes surveying his clanmates. They are still, eyes wide and pelts bristling. Ivypaw is the only one showing any emotion except fear and surprise. Pride, maybe.

And Sagestar *is* proud of her.

Chapter 43-

"Sagestar, you *killed* her."

The voice is irritating, but Sagestar only flicks his tail, rolling his eyes. "Real warriors kill in battle." Ferretsqueak, the source of the voice, shakes her head in pure disdain.

"N-"

"Really?" Ivypaw's eyes glitter with excitement. This is the first insistence, the leader thinks, where Ivypaw's words to him have been sincere, not teasing whatsoever. Sagestar nods. Ferretsqueak shakes her head persistently, disappointment etched into her frown.

"No! Starclan, Sagestar, what is *wrong* with you?" The she-cat's voice is warning, helpless. Annoying. Sagestar grits his teeth and rolls his eyes dramatically, earning a giggle from Ivypaw. Thinking of it, she is the only cat who doesn't glare right now, or critique him for Lilypatch's death. It wasn't his fault, really. Lilypatch had slandered him, in front of his clan!

"You did kill that cat, son...that's not-" Cedarmist pipes up in a low, cautious voice. Too easy to cut off.

"So what? Cats die in wars all the time," Sagestar narrows his eyes, jolting to a stop, "I don't think I need to explain this further." Anxious murmurs sound, before Sagestar silences them with a hiss. "Get it everyone?"

Nods.

Good.

Sagestar ruffles his pelt with a quick shake and starts to trot, faster this time, with no regard of his clanmates' paces. He'd sprint if he could. His pelt is stained with blood and slashes, his joints cramping

from the long journey to the border and back. He just wants to sleep now.

The journey goes fine as the patrol slips through undergrowth and heather bushes. Even a patch of sage, popping with purple flowers, is now in the forest. Little tree spouts had even started to grow with the green-leaf heat and the recent new-leaf rain. The forest is bustling with tiny voles, even if the birds have yet to return. Sagestar sighs in content.

And then pricks his ears.

Mewling sounds in the distance. Cries of hunger, sadness, desperation. Cries of a kit. Sagestar pauses, and so does his patrol, their bodies tense and rigid. They hear it too. Good.

"It's a kit," Ivypaw states breathlessly. Fridgidcall nods. The whole patrol bristles, looking in the presumable direction of the little wails. Sagestar blinks. His whole patrol looks nervous, and Sagestar can guess what they're fretting about. That he won't let them go, that he'll leave the kit to the raccoons or something. Sagestar won't though.

He already knows how he'll become a father.

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Flickerfire blinks at the kitten at his paws. The thing isn't quite pitiful, it's features more defined than any newborn kit left ordinarily dumped at the border. Tumblecry has told him many times before not to judge any mother who'd done quite a thing, spinning stories of starvation and danger in rogue life. But clan cat mothers who do such a thing, Tumblecry says have no good reason.

So why would a Windclan cat do such a thing?

Flickerfire looks up at Sagestar, his gaze worried and a tad suspicious. "I don't know, Sagestar. I just don't. Clan cats have no reason to abandon their kits, and of course being on top of Windclan scent markers could contribute to having a Windclan
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scent." What would Tumblecry say or think of this? The she-cat is currently collecting water mint from the nearby stream, oblivious to the news. Flickerfire is alone on this. For now, at least.

Sagestar frowns, his eyes cold. "I knew you wouldn't get it. We already know Void-" the tom pauses, *"Windclan* is heartless. Can we *really* put this past them?" Flickerfire hums thoughtfully.

"Perhaps we should speak to Windclan about this. Nip this problem at the bud," the tom feels embarrassed, almost. Branchheart had once told the tom that, as a kit. Flickerfire doesn't talk to the elder anymore, not really, but he now feels old, aged, somehow. And maybe he is.

"No," Sagestar growls instantly, eyes dangerous. His gaze filter to the kit, and Flickerfire instantly draws the tom kit closer. Flickerfire hasn't told Sagestar that the kit is a tom yet. He isn't quite sure why. Maybe it's a hunch. A bad feeling. A dread. But whatever it is, he doesn't want to ever push the kit away from his fluffy body.

"I just think-" Flickerfire starts, tone careful.

"Too bad," Sagestar snaps, "You've been avoiding my questions. Is it a tom? Is it weaned?" Flickerfire swallows, clearly hesitant. Sagestar's eyes harden angrily. "Leader's word is law, *Flickerfire."*

"Yes, I'm *aware,"* Flickerfire says roughly, voice sharp, "And fine. It's a tom. It could be weaned. It's impossible to know now, but probably not." Sagestar nods, eyes gleaming now.

"I'll watch over him."

"Sagest-"

"Question me again," Sagestar unsheathes his claws, annoyance rooted in his voice, "You know, you talk too much." Sagestar leans closer, anger rolling off him in waves. "Watch your mouth. Some day somebody will claw it off." The threat is clear, yet Flickerfire chooses to not notice.

"Death meets us all," he says carefully, "There's others around, Sagestar. Be careful." Flickerfire tries to be threatening too, but his

voice just sounds calm and calculated. He hadn't intended it to be that way.

Sagestar's eyes flash with something unreadable. Flickerfire stares at his cold gaze. Finally Sagestar blinks, but not slowly, and not out of love. The gaze that reappears after his eyelids is a glare, cold and angry. "The kit will be fine under my watch. Don't we want the clan to live after I die? He can be my successor." Flickerfire feels uneasiness crawl underneath his skin.

"He'll also be your *kit,* Sagestar. He'll be a kit for...well...probably five more moons. He'll be nothing to you, no use at all, for those moons," Flickerfire warns, feeling angry that he has to explain this to the tom. Sagestar rolls his eyes. He isn't understanding.

"He'll be fine."

"I-" Sagestar fixes the medicine with a harsh glance, "Okay...fine..." A feeling that he'd just made a mistake, a huge mistake, but he already knows he has. But what choice does he have? The tom is sure no matter what choice he makes, the kit will be in bad paws. His heart speeds up as he glances at the wriggling black kit. Sagestar smiles smugly, his face triumphant. He crouches, grabbing the tom kit and waving his tail.

"Bye," he mumbles through kit fur, "good luck with that water mint shortage." Flickerfire doesn't respond, his heart twisting at the black kit's calls. *If that kit gets hurt, it's my fault.* Flickerfire stares at the mewling kit, regret settling in his stomach.

Please be okay, little sprout.

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"Momma?"

The darkness in camp is inky, almost like liquid spreading through a dry riverbed. The stars shine brightly, as if approving of Sagestar's good choice. Dusty white clouds of fog roll over the forest, the tall trees' highest branches tickling the skyline. The stars are mere pinpoints in the sky, weaving around the branches. The smell is
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crisp, smelling more of leaf-fall or leaf-bare than green-leaf. It's cold, freezing, even, and Sagestar feels the tiny black kit squirm beside him, shivering. Sagestar has tried to remember his kit hood, but the only thing he can think of is milk and warmth. He isn't even warm right now, so he just wraps his tail around the kit and pulls it closer.

"I'm not your mother." Sagestar says awkwardly, scooting away from the kit. He hadn't realized it--no, *he*--could speak.

"Then..." The kit lifts his head, which is dotted with white spotting, "Where...am I?" The kit's voice is panicked, frantic, and Sagestar tenses. How can he explain that a kit's mother just left him, like that, at the border? He can't.

"You're mother was a bit stressed," Sagestar says. That could be true. "She gave you to me." The kit seems to calm, shrinking into the moss nest. He still shivers, teeth clattering, but he doesn't quite squirm.

"Alwight. How long?"

"Um. Well...she might not come back," Sagestar says awkwardly. The kit opens his eyes, his little pupils growing huge. His eyes are a dull green.

"Wha-bu-but Momma said she'd teach me how to hunt when I got to be thwee months old...and-" Sagestar pauses, blinking slowly, trying to understand.

Months? They sound like moons...but anyways, he'll have to learn not to be so whiny. His mom's probably dead anyhow. So what's the sense in missing her. She probably can't even hunt.

"Sorry. *I'll* teach you how to hunt, though. In clans though, you call those...'months'...moons, okay?" Sagestar looks unblinkingly at the kit. The kit's eyes stream with tears, even after Sagestar's apology. Sagestar smooths his mouth into a fine line. "Don't pout. Real warriors don't cry when they're hurt." The kit blinks heavily, his tears still coming.

"But..." the tom-kit sniffles, "I'm sad." Sagestar sighs.

"Wipe those tears. I'm not going to be kept up all night by sobs, alright?" Sagestar tries to sound nice, but the kit only looks a bit sadder. His dull green eyes are burdened with liquid.

"O-Okay..." he sniffles audibly, "but...Momma said you'we supposed to ask names when you meet someone. Wh-What's you'we name?" Sagestar flicks her tail around the shivering kit.

"Sagestar. I'm the leader, so I get 'star' at the end of my name. You'll get that too someday," the leader explains briskly. *Perhaps you'll get nine lives, too. But that part doesn't matter. Starclans' cats are cowards, anyways.*

"I'm...I'm Lupine," the kit says shakily, nodding, "Does that mean I'll be Lupine...star?" Sagestar nods, already thinking. Lupine is a weak name. A flower. Sagestar doesn't really like it, not at all, in fact, but he just nods. Nods, like he always does. Like he always has. Has had too.

But not anymore. I'm leader, I make the calls. Especially for my *kit.*

"How about Ravenkit?" Sagestar says, but it really isn't a suggestion. The kit pricks his ears with interest, though he just looks mostly confused.

"Nu-uh. Waven isn't my name! It's Lupine." The kit sounds matter of fact. Part of Sagestar knows the tom kit isn't disobeying, just stating what he thinks is true, but the other is a tad irritated.

"Raven is better. It's strong, sneaky, and it matches your coat," Sagestar has made up his mind already, "Also, when you're a kitten you have 'kit' at the end of your name. So Ravenkit it is then?" Sagestar's gaze is cold, beckoning.

"Well...I guess so..." Ravenkit looks painfully hesitant. Sagestar narrows his eyes.

"Good. Rest now, little one. You'll meet everyone tomorrow," Sagestar yawns deeper, collapsing into the nest. Ravenkit nods, looking troubled and confused. Hopefully he does rest, however.

"G'night, Sage...staw" Ravenkit mews, turning his head away from the orange and white leader.

"Night, little one."

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yes little ravenkit can't say his r's (: they will be replaced with 'w's for now, and his little speech impediment will go away over time! i hope you enjoyed though! also this chapter was like a little few day time skip, by the way
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Chapter 44-

"Faster!" Mallardkit hisses, head ducked and paws folding under him. His speed is unmatched, Flickerfire notices with interest. Myrtlekit is fierce and quick tongued, just like her mother, yet meaner, in a way. Rustkit is charming, his tiny paws and frame making him seem small, needing protection. Yet, his personality takes after Yewmist, definitely. Snailkit is loud and fidgety, often joking around and having a little squeaky laugh.

Flickerfire loves them like his own kits.

Mallardkit tumbles into his sister, who wobbles and falls nose first into the soil and rolls into the stone of the medicine cat's den. Myrtlekit cries out in anger, springing onto her paws and hissing at her brother. Flickerfire laughs at the kits, who stop playing and look in the direction of the cheery sound.

"Hey!" Snailkit purrs loudly, "Shut up, stupid-heads! It's Uncle Flick!" The tortie tom rushes forward, though his motor skills still lack, and he falls head over paws. A stampede of kits clamber over to him like multi-colored baby badgers. Cute ones, at that. The whole camp is watching, it seems, all giggling at the little ones.

Once arriving, the little ones drape themselves over Flickerfire's paws. Their purrs are strong and bright, like kit's mews should be. Flickerfire smiles. No, grins. His mouth stretches into a sideways crescent. "Hi, little guys."

"And girl," Myrtlekit pipes indignantly, eyes deadly and challenging. Flickerfire nods with a tiny smile.

"Of course. What are y'all up to?"

"Playing!" Snailkit squeaks, giggling in delight as his little body rolls over Flickerfire's large paws. "Playing tag!" Myrtlekit nods seriously.

"Mallardkit can't play anymore. He's too fast."

"That's not fair!" The small lean-bodied tortoiseshell tom squeals, elongating the last word. Flickerfire's whiskers twitch is amusement, but he hopes the tom doesn't notice. His white tail moves to wrap around Mallardkit reassuringly.

"That just means you're really fast," Flickerfire nods at the little tom. The kit huffs.

"Momma said Starclan doesn't like meanies," Mallardkit stares pointedly at Myrtlekit, *"Myrtlekit."* Myrtlekit rolls her eyes, but Rustkit nods.

"Yeah!" the brownish red tom bobs his head vigorously, "Like Sagestar, right?" Flickerfire pauses, pelt rippling in unease.

"Well..." Flickerfire hums, mind buzzing, "Sagestar's not mean just...serious. You have to be serious to be a leader," Myrtlekit and Rustkit simultaneously huff in confusion.

"So I have to be mean to be a leader?" Snailkit pipes, "Sagestar glares at me!"

"Yeah, and he snarled at me," Myrtlekit's eyes go round, her tail lashing, "Mom told him to stick his nose in fox dung!" She looks proud. Flickerfire chuckles, scooping the she-kit up in his paws.

"Well, he does it again, tell your brothers to bite his ankle fur clean off. They should protect you," Flickerfire gives the splotched black and white she-kit a quick lick. Myrtlekit giggles brightly, squirming away from her uncle.

"I'll always protect you, Myrtlekit!" Mallardkit declares fiercely, and then adds as an afterthought, "Well, if you let me play tag." Myrtlekit hums thoughtfully, then nods hesitantly.

"Only if you promise to go easy on Snailkit. He's slo-"

"Okay, little ones, go play," Flickerfire interrupts, "Have fun!" Snailkit giggles, and Mallardkit grins triumphantly. The squad scampers into the broad view of the clan cats, and Flickerfire purrs in delight. The kits are happy and healthy. Perhaps it'll be okay, even with Sagestar as leader.

We'll figure it out.

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"Sagestar?"

Sagestar looks up, annoyance prickling at him. It's Cleftpaw, looking small and a little embarrassed. The Thunderclan leader almost sends him away. What does the tom want anyways?

"What?" Sagestar fights to keep his tone passive and not snappy, though his annoyance seeps through. Cleftpaw flinches, his tail flicking up and down.

"Well...remember when we had our warrior assessment? Like...a moon ago?" Cleftpaw looks a little smug, and Sagestar frowns. He does remember. All the siblings had passed, even clumsy Whitepaw. So that means they deserve names, huh? Sagestar lashes his tail, blinking. Ugh. He has better things to do.

"Sure I do. Whatever," Sagestar shrugs simply, "I'll do it later." Cleftpaw bristles, his tail lashing.

"I'm not a kit. I'm not even technically an apprentice!" the tom says indignantly, "Me and Cedarmist have nothing to do anymore!" Sagestar narrows his eyes, tail folding delicately over his paws.

"Fine," he spits, "Gather your siblings." Sagestar pauses, surveying Cleftpaw. Excited, smiling, but just barely. His paws, fidgeting. Sagestar rolls his eyes, curling his lips into a snarl. *You're warrior name should be Cleftlip.*

"Thanks!" Cleftpaw purrs, "I'll tell Ivy and Whitey to groom!" The black tom wrinkles his nose, a fake expression of disgust. "You should groom too." Cleftpaw grins toothily, his turquoise eyes shining. Sagestar rolls his eyes in annoyance. Perhaps he just
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shouldn't do the ceremony. It'd be embarrassing for Cleftpaw...No. The clan is due for more warriors. And plus, Cleftpaw will probably nag Sagestar until he folds.

Ugh. Whatever.

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"Ivyleaf! Ivyleaf! Ivyleaf!" Flickerfire cheers gingerly. The black and white she-cat stands proudly, tail raised and the clan's praise wrapping around her. Her siblings gather around her, Whitetuft and Cleftrock. Flickerfire had never been close with the three, obviously, and he doesn't feel exactly thrilled for them, but he does cheer. It feels right. They had been apprentices for lots more moons then they should've been. They all had all failed their assessment once, but Tumblecry had made sure no one poked fun at them. She said they probably were probably already hard on themselves. But now they're warriors, full warriors.

"Congrats!" Minnowrose purrs at the three, offering Ivyleaf a headbutt and the two toms licks on the shoulders. Whitetuft purrs loudly.

"I'm so excited to sit vigil!" the white tom whisks his tail, "I'm glad I'm not called Whitefur... I dunno...that name is just...-"

"Yet you like the name Whitetail?" Ivyleaf asks, rolling her eyes, "Cool. Makes sense."

"Well-" Whitetuft starts, before pausing, "...Whitetuft is better than both of those! Way better!" Cleftrock nods.

"Vigil is exhausting," Cliffstoop comments, though her voice is happy, amused, "You'll want to sleep for a moon after!" Ivyleaf frowns, but Whitetuft just smiles.

"I bet my joints will ache after," she says, her voice whiny, like she's already complaining, "But oh, well we can still talk, doesn't Sappaw look so beautiful with those flowers in her pelt? Cliffstoop, you're so lucky!" Cliffstoop ducks her head and laughs nervously.

"I am. She's smart and seems pretty kind. She'll be a good warrior,
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eventually. Whitetuft nods, a faraway look in his eyes. Ivyleaf frowns for a moment, before she smiles again. Flickerfire is confused. She's being unnaturally nice. And he thinks he knows why.

"I agree," Minnowrose purrs, and the conversation officially shifts to Sappaw, "With a young cat like you mentoring her, I'm sure she'll be just fine." Cliffstoop clicks her tongue.

"I dunno...You mentored Yewmist amazingly!"

"Well Fallowshard is quite the cat, isn't she? Having you're second apprentice so young must be thrilling!" Minnowrose responds, touching her nose to Cliffstoop's. Flickerfire smiles at the thought. Fallowshard is a nice cat, constantly playing with Ravenkit. The kit has been lonely lately, clearly. Flickerfire would be too, if he had Sagestar as a father.

"Flickerfire...?" The voice is small, as if the cat is scared to speak. Flickerfire turns quickly, eyes sweeping up the image in front of him. A small, light yellow, she-cat. She looks scared, maybe nervous, but definitely not happy. It's Sappaw, large eyes wide and down-cast, her voice quiet, and her paws shuffling over the dried sand of Thunderclan camp. "We-...er...need to talk. Now, please...?"

Flickerfire feels uneasiness ripple his pelt, but the she-cat looks just *scared,* so the white tom nods. "Oh...okay," he tries to sound confident, "Where? In my den?" Sappaw instantly shakes her head, eyes widening.

"N-No! I mean...no. We need to be out of camp. Where no one can follow...." the she-cat glances around anxiously, paws working in the dust, and somehow she looks up, more desperate, "Please...now. It can't wait."

"We can't, Sappaw," Flickerfire says, tail sweeping the dust into air, "Cliffstoop will want to show you the territory-

"Cricketkit's death wasn't an accident!" the she-cat blurts, her voice just over a whisper, "Help me, or I'll help myself." The last part may be a threat, as the she-cat looks almost dangerous, but Flickerfire

listens. His heart twists, falling into his belly and stirring up it's contents. Thinking of some twoleg poisoning Cricketkit on purpose makes him want to vomit.

"Um. Quickly. I'll tell Cliffstoop-"

"Tell her not to tell any cat else, except maybe Tumblecry. Please."

"Alright."

Flickerfire turns as Sappaw makes her way through the crowd of congratulations. He lifts his head, searching for Sappaw's mentor. He find her, talking with Fallowshard, the two laughing a bit. Flickerfire ducks his head, pushing through the crowd. He bumps shoulders with Yewmist, who smiles wide and apologizes. Flickerfire mutters that it's not his fault. The white tom stops in front of Cliffstoop, who looks up. Fallowshard smiles her supportive and sort of pretty smile, and waves her tail.

"Hi," Fallowshard says softly, like she always does. Flickerfire half-smiles back, waving his tail too.

"Um. Cliffstoop..." Flickerfire starts, directing his attention to the small gray she-cat, "Sappaw and me need to...speak. It'll be quick and I'm sorry f-"

"It's fine," the gray she-cat mews graciously, blinking softly, "I wasn't really rushing. Just...before nightfall, okay? And make sure she stays with you. We think there's foxes out because of Aloe..." The she-cat trails off, shaking her head and replacing her nervous frown with a smile. "Just be careful alright?" The she-cat forward to lick Flickerfire's ear. Flickerfire offers an anxious purr.

"Gotta go..." Flickerfire waves his tail, "Bye." A chorus of farewell sounds behind Flickerfire as he skids away, eyes darting around. Perhaps he should collect herbs on the walk; Tumblecry has been overworked lately, and she won't be happy if Flickerfire simply just 'goes on a walk.' Okay. Herbs and talk.

"Over here," Sappaw's small voice calls, and Flickerfire nods at her form, crouched near the entrance. The she-cat's body rises, and she

slinks out of camp. Flickerfire follows.

They walk for a moment, paws thumping along with their hearts. Sappaw is quiet, unsure, her paws shuffling over the fallen green leaves and scattered twigs. Flickerfire swallows nervously, his tail flicking.

"Cliffstoop said to hurry...how...what's-" Sappaw blinks slowly, stopping.

"It wasn't twoleg poison, Flickerfire...it was..." Sappaw swallows to, trailing off, "Okay so the prey's mouth was like...really full and a red...thing...was inside of it. A berry. I thought maybe I was wrong but... I saw the red thing in your den...It had to be a death berry..." The apprentice's eyes cloud over with pain, a frown etched into her youthful face. "And Sagestar..." Sappaw stops talking, her face crumbling.

Sagestar had delivered the prey.

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sorry for the filler!! i know not much we didn't know was revealed here but i hope next chapter is better!! (;
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Chapter 45-

Sagestar blinks at his brother, his den comfortingly warm around him. Flickerfire stands, fur bristling, his white pelt waving around. His tail lashes angrily, or maybe in worry. Either way, Flickerfire looks scary.

"What?" Sagestar's voice fights to stay docile, but it comes out as a snarl. Oh well. "What's wrong?" His first thoughts go to Wavekit, or maybe Ravenkit. Flickerfire likes Echopaw, right? And Echopaw likes Wavekit? Could that be it? "Is Wavekit hurt or something? Or is it Ravenkit? He's been out playing for a while."

"No. But it's another kit," Flickerfire's face is the embodiment of anger, his fur on edge and his tail thwapping against the walls of the stone den, moving in wide swings. "Cricketkit." Sagestar sits almost instantly, hoping Flickerfire doesn't notice his back fur pick up, or the fur on his tail bushing up. He licks his shoulder, pretending to frown.

"Poor kit. Has some other cat gotten hurt? Have you hunted by the twoleg place?" Sagestar narrows his eyes as Flickerfire huffs. The tom paces, just like Aloestar had after he'd taught Sappaw a lesson.

"No," Flickerfire snarls, "I think you know full well what I want. You killed him, didn't you? You killed him and now you've started a war and there'll be more death. Is that what you want, Sagestar? Death? Power? Does fear make you strong, Sagestar?" Flickerfire hisses, his tail bushed up completely, "Or should I say Sage*song?* Because Tumblecry said your 'leader ceremony' was unnaturally quick. I hadn't thought of that at first. I thought it'd just been quick. But now I'm doubting if you have nine lives at all." The white tom unsheathes his claws, and for a moment he looks *dangerous.*

Sagestar's fur puffs out, and he lowers his voice. "Is that a threat?" the tom hisses, his fur standing on end, "Watch yourself. Because I have more training, more credibility. Whaddya 'gonna do, exile me?" The tom laughs cruelly. "You won't." Flickerfire's fur flattens

slightly. Sagestar wants to rolls his eyes.

Cricketkit's death wasn't my proudest moment, sure, but it kept me being leader. And my clan needs a leader. And now my own brother threatens me? I've done everything for my clan, hard things, and this is how they repay me? They threaten me? What if he goes through on it? Sagestar swallows his fear. *No. I'll get to him first.*

"Go. Now," Sagestar hisses, "What do you think you were doing, threatening me? Watch your back." Sagestar unsheathes his claws, face smoothing back to calm, cool. "Go, before I tell the clan of your threat." Flickerfire blinks, his voice lowering, sadly, though anger still slips through his tone.

"You're just like Snapstar," he says weakly, "Are you just going to keep killing cats? Is that your plan? That's what you want?" Sagestar blinks back, surprised.

"...No. But I have to make hard decisions for my clan," the leader hisses, "Go." Flickerfire hisses too, wheeling around in a blink. He is gone, leaving the den bathed in the scent of anger and lost brotherhood.

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Flickerfire's chest feels heavy as he weaves around Smoothpearl's playing kits, worry rippling through him. His legs feel stiff, rigid, his breaths labored and quick. He shouldn't have threatened Sagestar, should he? Now he has a reason to hurt him, to exile him. Who would believe Flickerfire anyways?

"Flickerfire...?" The voice is curious, small, and Flickerfire feels his heart quicken at the surprise. It instantly slows, however, as he turns his head, blinking away the panic. Fallowshard, sitting in front of his den, which he was going to anyways. Flickerfire blinks at his friend, waving his tail and hoping it isn't too bushed up. Fallowshard's eyes flicker with a flash of worry, but she quickly smiles. "Stomach ache."

"...Right," Flickerfire shakes his head, "Sorry." The tom tries to sound okay, to sound happy. Hopefully he isn't failing. "Do you
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know if you ate something bad? Rotten prey maybe...red berries...of course it'd probably hurt a lot more-"

"Nothing bad, I don't think...Do you think maybe a mouse was poisoned by two legs, like Sagestar said?" Worry radiates from the she-cat. Flickerfire purses his lips. *There never was poison!*

"Probably not..." Flickerfire swallows his anxiousness, "I'll give you water mint, though. You should rest a little after, until it goes away, but if it doesn't you should come back." Fallowshard nods, offering a small smile. Flickerfire doesn't smile back as he pushes past the she-cat briskly, pelt brushing against her. A warm spark flickers idly in his chest.

"Um..." Fallowshard's voice is small, quiet, like it always is, laden with worry, "Flickerfire...you alright?" A feeling, an unsavory one, at that, creeps into into Flickerfire's brain. It lashes, screaming, but so quiet, so persistent. No, Flickerfire is not okay. He'll never be okay again and he hates it, hates it so much and it *bubbles up and up and spills and-*

"Get out," Flickerfire whisks around, hoping pain doesn't cloud his vision. His tail puffs up, fur bushing and tears he hadn't let spill, not even at Aloestar's vigil, threatening to fall.

"Wha-"

"If you're just going to act like we're friends then. Get. Out." Flickerfire all but yells, anger replacing sadness. He doesn't really know why he's angry, but his fur is bristling. Fallowshard blinks, her eyes wide and pelt fluffed up.

"I'm...sorry," the she-cat mews, her voice quiet and reserved again. Flickerfire hisses, wheeling around.

"Hope you feel better," he manages to mumble, his anger fizzling into sadness. He's messed everything up, hasn't he? Again and again he's wrong. Mistakes follow him, death follows him but... but maybe...maybe if no cat gets close to him...they'll be fine. Maybe.

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okay it's here! gonna try to do next chapter too but...life?? idk sorry for not proof reading, please point out mistakes if you see them!! i'm tired lol.

Chapter 46-

Night spreads over camp, Sagestar watching it unfold from the split wood in his den, eyes slit. Next to him, Ravenkit rests, his little body wrapped around Sagestar's whole fore arm. Sagestar had allowed this, licking the kit gently on the head. It always helps him rest, and Sagestar needs a break from his constant cries for his mother. He's fine now, and Sagestar wriggles his paw out of the kit's grasp.

Another kit needs him tonight. He needs to burn off steam, and Sagestar can't slow himself as he shoots out of the nest. His tail lashes. He feels...excited, like a kit before their apprentice ceremony. Exhilarated. He glances at his paws, shaking with cold and also excitement. The tom sighs. He isn't...particularly...proud of himself. He's more...accepting. Perhaps he's not doing what's best for his clan. Unlikely, but... it seems a pawful of cats think so. But what can he do? Leaders make hard decisions. They mess up. Perhaps killing Cricketkit wasn't...the best idea, but what was? There was no good decisions but Sagestar had to make one. And that *isn't* his fault.

Now Sagestar will make another decision, and if that's wrong...so be it. Sagestar pads into the night, eyes already adjusted to the shield of dark. Shield for Sagestar, at least, as he hops silently from his perch over camp, ruffling his fur as he shakes it free of moss. His pelt lays flat after the shake, and he continues towards the nursery.

Inside it's quiet, aside from the sound of tiny sneezes and Smoothpearl's soft breathing. Sagestar blinks at his sister. Sister. He hasn't used that word in a while, especially not for Smoothpearl. He's only been watching the kits, looking who's slow, fast, angry. He'd laid stats in his head coldly, not caring much about the kits themselves but their traits, their qualities.

Mallardkit is fast, lean, too much like a Windclan cat. Like Sagestar. He doesn't like that. His tiny frame looks too much like Voidflicker's did, too fluffy like Flickerfire's. Myrtlekit is much the same, small

body engulfed in fur, her tongue as sharp as Smoothpearl's. Her words, already rude, put through a kit's honesty filter are just...cruel. Sometimes, anyways. Perhaps Sagestar will mentor her, if Ravenkit doesn't take up all his time. Snailkit and Rustkit are just followers, but at least Snailkit is muscled and Rustkit is honest. Not future leaders but...something. Maybe. Sagestar thinks Rustkit will be an okay medicine cat.

Out of all of them, though, Sagestar thinks he hates Mallardkit the most. His lean form, his obnoxious giggles, the way his tail flicks grandly. It reminds Sagestar of milk and moss and he *hates* that.

Sagestar creeps forward, low, like he's stalking prey. Small, cat-sized, prey. One moon old prey. Mallardkit rests, curled in a ball with his chin sitting on Rustkit's shoulder. He looks so small, so defenseless, and Sagestar almost feels a flicker of pity. Of remorse, maybe, but it unlikely. Maybe just acknowledgement for what he's about to cause. Pain, for one thing. Pain for Smoothpearl. But she deserves that. *Does the kit, though?*

Sagestar doesn't have time to think as he gently plucks Mallardkit up by the loose skin of his neck. The kit, still young enough to freeze as he gets picked up, barely flutters his eyes open. The kit is just stiff, hanging for Sagestar's jaws. He swings gently as Sagestar wheels around and shoots out of the den. Why stay longer than he has to? *Why take a kit who can't fight back?*

Whatever. It's too late now, Sagestar realizes as his paws fly over the short cropped grass and dry, cracking, sand and clay. Mallardkit's already hanging from his jaws, Cricketkit's already dead, and Sagestar already has come to terms with it all. He's done bad things, but so has Flickerfire and Smoothpearl and Aloestar. They've made mistakes. It doesn't matter anymore. It'll be okay.

Sagestar ducks out of the camp entrance. He's being, has been, smart about this. There isn't night guard tonight. Sagestar had made sure of that.

"It's cold!" The squeaky voice makes Sagestar pause for a moment, before he silently flicks his eyes down to the little tortoiseshell tom. The kit's eyes are open, shining a baby blue, like all kit's eyes do at

first. Sagestar doesn't speak, only quickening his pace. The kit sleepily blinks his eyes, looking small and innocent. "Why's it's so cwold?" Mallardkit shivers conveniently. "And where's we going?"

"Sh," Sagestar mumbles through his mouthful of fur, lifting his neck to avoid soft, downy, kit fur from tickling his neck. It doesn't work.

"Why's?" Mallardkit's eyes blink fully open, pupils dilated in fear or maybe curiosity, "Oh, are we spies! Are we going to run from dead-but-alive cats?" Sagestar wants to roll his eyes. Starclan cats?

"No," the tom grumbles, quickening more. He's practically running now, paws thrumming over ground dusted with stray sticks and tiny but painful acorns. Sagestar just wants to go, to get this over with and disguise this as a night walk, or a hunt, or something other then it is. Because it's revenge. Deserved revenge, but perhaps not commendable revenge. That's okay, Sagestar will get away with it, but it still doesn't feel...right. Sagestar blinks, focusing on the kit now. If he's having fun, then it's fine. No harm, no foul.

"Oh, okay!" the kit chirps, squirming, "But...um...I'm tired! I liked the nursery's nest so..." The kit pauses, a large yawn interrupting his sentence. Mallardkit clicks his jaws closed, huffing. "We's go back?"

"No," Sagestar mutters, voice tight, "Not for a long time."

"How long's?" Mallardkit instantly asks, making Sagestar think he'd said it more out of habit than actual curiosity. Kits question everything, don't they? Sagestar sighs as he weaves around one of the last spindly trees. They're here, and it almost *hurts* to realize.

Gently, Sagestar sets an exhausted Mallardkit down. The tortoiseshell tom flops down, kit blue eyes shining with exhaustion. "H-Here?" He speaks mid yawn, his voice warped and distorted. The little kit's eyes flutter, not quite closed. Sagestar feels almost bad.

"Yep," Sagestar says cautiously, glancing around. He hasn't really thought this through, has he?Mallardkit could die, if no cat finds him in time. Starvation, foxes, raccoons, dogs. Even owls. Yet Sagestar doesn't feel like it's abandoning a kit. At least not one of his clan. This is his nephew, his sister's kit, yet he feels nothing as

he stares down. Perhaps he's doing the wrong thing, but it doesn't feel *wrong.* It feels *good.*

"So...why's?" Mallardkit asks, jaw splitting in another huge yawn. The kit is very clearly worn out. *From what? Being carried?*

"Smoothpearl doesn't want you anymore. The clan doesn't want you. Another clan does, though. So don't worry. You'll be fine," Sagestar doesn't try to sound reassuring, his voice cold and flat, "Some cat will pick you up and you tell them about a cat called Bluebell, 'kay? That's your mother. If you do that, Smoothpearl will want you back." Sagestar flicks his gaze down, taking in the kit.

The tom is clearly crying, tears rolling down his fuzzy cheeks. "Y-Yes she does!" he protests shakily, "I-I dunno who Bluebell is! I-"

"Yes, she doesn't like you. But she'll like you if you stop crying and act confused when the cats get here, say you miss Bluebell. Never tell anyone how you came from Thunderclan, or Smoothpearl will never come back for you," Sagestar's glare is sharp, his tail lashing in finality, "Get it?" Mallardkit whimpers.

"Why's doesn't she-"

"Okay?"

"O-...Okay..." The kit sniffles sadly, "When...if I keep the secret...when will....Momma come back?" Sagestar blinks, turning tail. If he runs, will the kit follow? Or try, at least?

"Stay put, and your new clan will find you. Smoothpearl will come...after a moon," Sagestar lies, feeling his pelt grow hot with anticipation. Tomorrow will be chaos, chaos Sagestar will enjoy. If he says Mallardkit wandered out and perhaps Windclan invaded the territory and took him. Another reason for war.

Mallardkit looks up with glossy eyes. "Tell...Tell Smoothpearl I-" Sagestar flicks his tail, interrupting.

"She doesn't like you. She won't want to hear from you," Sagestar rolls his eyes at the pitiful kit, "Bye, though."

With that, Sagestar leaves the Windclan border.

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Sagestar's eyes open, peaking into his darkened den. Tiredness pulls at him the rest of his body follows, pursuing his nest. He's tired after Mallardkit's whining, so tired. He just wants rest after everything, only furthering his annoyance as he blinks to adjust his eyes to see not only one black outline but two. Webkit.

"He was sobbing," The kit says blankly, eyes challenging, "It woke me up from across camp. Where were *you?"*

"Walk," Sagestar hisses roughly, glaring at the black kit, "I told you to not come in here unless you're my kit, didn't I?" His tail lashes angrily. Ravenkit's eyes look up, not glittering with tears.

"I was scawed you left like..." Sagestar curls his lip.

"If you're to be leader you have to be *strong,"* The leader hisses angrily, "Not weak and whiny. A she-cat shouldn't have to calm *you* down." Webkit growls.

"What's wrong with she-cats?"

"Get out." Webkit growls again, her fur bristling.

"Make me." Sagestar blinks at the bold request, his mouth twisting into a grin. The tom steps forward, yanking Webkit by the scruff. The kit squeals.

"Put. Me. Down!" She mews indignantly, her hiss sounding squeaky and scared. Webkit wiggles, squirming as Sagestar leaps gracefully off of High Ledge and drops her not-so-gently. The kit thumps to the ground, eyes shining with rage. Her voice lowers a few octaves. The she-kit doesn't protest more, only curling her lip and leaning towards Sagestar.

"I hate you."

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chapter four mentioned (: enjoy guys, hope you had fun reading!!

Chapter 47-

Starclan is a beautiful thing.

T oo bad Aloestar is in it.

Sagestar blinks at the starry world. It seems almost fake, the beautiful glow of the place ethereal, the green leaves of the tree nearly seeming like plastic. A stream is right in front of Sagestar, a cluster of fish-smelling cats laughing together, a kit looking no older than a day old wobbling between them. The trees towering above are thick and smell fresh. They look it too. Sagestar is infatuated.

"Look here."

Sagestar turns slowly, hesitant to move his eyes away from the lovely scene. Is Tansypaw here? Lilypatch, maybe? Who knows. Sagestar turns, tail brushing the scattered leaves, and takes in the cats behind him. Cats. Plural. Sagestar blinks, taking in the glaring cats with raised hackles and laid back ears. Suddenly Starclan isn't so beautiful. Sagestar has dealt with his clan's anger, but not so many cats that could hurt him. Maybe.

"Sagesong" the voice is calm and controlled, though the black cat with one shining green eye's face is pulled into a tense frown. His tail is still, not lashing, his fur not raised like the other's. "I refuse to be afraid of you." Sagestar's throat is suddenly dry, but a growl still emits from it.

"Why am I here?" the tom hisses, stepping back. His tail sweeps dangerously close to the river water.

"Give up your act, Sagesong!" a cat yowls from the crowd, yet the cat in the front- Sagestar refuses to say, to think, his name- doesn't flinch. Sagestar bares his teeth uncomfortably.

"It's Sagestar," Sagestar corrects, back-arched. Why do dead cats refuse to call him that? Sure, he doesn't officially have nine lives, but he's acted as leader. He's deserves the name, definitely. So what's holding Starclan back? He's been a good leader.

"Sure!" a tinier voice, perhaps an apprentice, calls, infuriated. Sagestar huffs.

"Give up leadership, Sagesong," The one-eyed cat demands, voice smooth. His tail flicks, as if the tom is somehow infinitely bored by this talk. Sagestar blinks at the request, his chest seizing. He feels his heart pound irregularly.

"I'm a good leader!" Sagestar argues, anger burning in him, though his voice sounds like a kit protesting being washed on ceremony day, "Who else would lead, anyways? Have you mouse-brained Starclan cats not thought this through?" A cat beside the blacked one-eyed tom flicks an ear. Sagestar had barely noticed her there before, but now he is painfully aware of her existence. Aloestar.

"Insults won't save you now, Sagesong," Aloestar flicks her tail, "Nothing will save you now, anyways. If you don't do this Starclan will never forgive for your mistakes. Some have already chosen to not forgive you. Do you suppose this'll make them want to accept you into our ranks?" Sagestar blinks his eyes, not surprised but...perhaps sad, maybe? Maybe. He's done everything for his clan, and yet no cat deems it enough.

"I'm not living my life for Starclan," Sagestar finally decides on the words after a brief pause, "I'm living for Thunderclan. I make hard decisions for them." Aloestar blinks at his words, clearly a bit shook. Her tail suddenly lashes and she bares her teeth.

"Hard decisions?" she snorts disdainfully, her laugh cold and wrong, "You killed a kit, two leaders, and an innocent warrior for your clan? A kit?" Aloestar sounds exasperated, her claws coming out. "You started a war, that could kill dozens of cats, for fun?"

"I didn't mean-"

"Cricketkit died thinking he was stupid for eating that prey! He'd thought he'd accidentally added something to it, maybe a poisonous berry got lodged inside. He died watching his sister break down and his mother screech out her grief. Was that really a hard decision, or are you making yourself the victim?" Aloestar asks, her eyes blazing, "When he died he refused to leave his corpse, trying to cram himself back in and comfort his mother. He didn't leave until we dragged him up into the starry lands

of Starclan, and yet all his death was to you was a hard decision?"

"I had to protect myself! Without me...without a leader...we'd be weak and flimsy! Thunderclan needs a leader," Sagestar argues, his heart pounding. He doesn't feel good, not really. The image of Cricketkit trying to cram his soul back into his body is painful. Sagestar imagines it happening to Wavekit, to Ravenkit, and it hurts slightly more. His body shakes in anger and a bit of fear.

"Not one like you," The one-eyed black cat says gravely, his tail sweeping low. "You've made your decision. We'll never see you in our ranks." Sagestar blinks. The realization of it makes him flinch, but he doesn't repel the idea of the Dark Forest yet. Not yet.

Sagestar only has time to wonder one thing before his thrown back to reality, to the real world. His query is hesitant and painfully curious.

Why wasn't Lacewing there?

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"Flickerfire, get up," The voice has a desperate edge to it, as if it's life or death, *"Please."*

Flickerfire blinks his eyes open groggily, blue eyes staring at Smoothpearl, who looks broken. Tears glitter in her eyes, some rolling down her cheeks. Flickerfire blinks again, this time taking in his sister's face. Depressed, worried, anxious, *angry*. Flickerfire has never really seen his sister like this. She'd looked similar when Voidflicker had taken them, or when they found out Snapstar was never and had never been their father. But this is panic. Pure panic.

"Yes?" Flickerfire murmurs through a yawn, not knowing if some cat could've gotten hurt. Maybe.

"Mallardkit's missing," the she-cat's voice is small, like she's wishing for the reality to not be true. Flickerfire blinks in surprise. Missing?

"Since when?" The tom asks, panicked as he rises to his paws. He is quick, shaking his pelt briefly to rid of moss and dirt. The white tom has to bite his tongue to stop from firing off questions. "And
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who is out searching?"

"I don't know...he fell asleep with us last night...No cat saw him sneaking out, and how sneaky can and moon old kit be? I don't know who's out searching...Echopaw, maybe? And Fringestrike..." The she-cat talks fast, her voice infinitely worried. Flickerfire leans forwards, licking his sister's ear.

"Remember that one time we snuck out and Sagestar got hurt? It's like that. We'll find him."

"Sagestar got hurt," Smoothpearl repeats anxiously, whipping around, "Starclan..." Flickerfire pads forward, his face smooth. Like he isn't panicking. Like he isn't imagining his nephew all alone in the forest.

"He'll be okay. You'll be okay. Go help look. I'll watch the other three," Flickerfire nods to himself, "Okay?"

"No," Smoothpearl tries to breathe, "Yewmist's got them. You help look too. The more cats we have looking..." The she-cat shakes out her fur. "Just help look?" Her eyes are pleading?

How can Flickerfire say no?

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"No." Flickerfire's voice is cold and emotionless as he rejects Sagestar. The leader's question rings in his head, surprising yet not welcome. *"Why don't we search for Mallardkit together, like brothers?"* Flickerfire's eyes are angry and cold. That isn't surprising, considering the cat they see. An awful brother, a kit murderer, and a chaotic leader. Flickerfire almost snorts in disdain. It's not a happy event they're talking about. It's his nephew! Why can't he understand that?

"No?" Sagestar laughs tensely, "I'm your leader. You'll do as I say." Flickerfire's heart leaps. So he'll be forced into this, just like that?

"Please," Flickerfire feels like he's begging, which is almost as bad as walking with Sagestar, "My...our nephew is missing. I don't have time-" Sagestar's eyes flash dangerously.
~~~

"Come on now," the tom's voice is friendly and chipper, "We'll search, don't worry. Perhaps we'll go to the place Tansypaw died. Mallardkit might have wandered there." Flickerfire's heart pounds in his chest. Fear is controlling him now, and his voice lowers.

"What, are you gonna kill me?" Flickerfire asks, his voice teasing even though it holds real fearful curiosity, "It'd be suspicious for you." Sagestar's eyes darken even if his charming goofy smile remains.

"We're going or you'll regret it," Sagestar's smiles, voice low and dangerous, "You'll be a rogue, blamed for Cricketkit's death." Sagestar laughs like he's joking. "C'mon. Let's find Mallardkit!" Sagestar pads off, tail curled enthusiastically. Fallowshard nods at the leader, and Sagestar smiles sadly. Too sadly. Flickerfire is unnerved.

He'll go, but it'll be the last time. It'll be the last time he'll be a pushover. The last time he'll stay silent. Whatever happens on this 'walk' Flickerfire will tell. He will.

The tom follows his brother out hesitantly, his chest tightening with every small movement. The fluffy white tom wants to run, wants to hide from his own brother, but he doesn't. He wants, head hanging high and tail swooping low, out of camp.

The forest is unnerving knowing that Mallardkit could be in it. The grass is brown and dead in patches, clumps of forest soil around it, holding dead roots too. The two toms walk in silence, taking in the dead trees and brown dirt-encrusted bark. The forest is bleak and sad. The birdsong is held to a minimum, as if the birds are too holding silent vigil. Flickerfire scans the forest, eyes calculating. The brothers are silent and both unnerved.

"So," Sagestar starts suddenly, eyes cold and focused ahead, "Aloestar and Snapstar really failed us, didn't they?" Flickerfire is surprised the tom's comment isn't quite aggressive towards Flickerfire. It's more...sad, perhaps? Like a cry for help, silent and depressing. Flickerfire's heart flashes as he considers.

"Maybe," he finally says, "But it wasn't Aloestar's fault." Flickerfire's

mother's cold, glassy, eyes flash in his head, and he feels sick. Sagestar simply shrugs.

"I'm messed up. The clan hates me. You do too," Sagestar doesn't look shocked or angry or even sad. He looks neutral. Sagestar shrugs again. Flickerfire flicks an ear curiously. This isn't like his brother, admitting his faults.

"I guess we're all emotionally messed up, though," Sagestar reasons, "We're all in too deep, aren't we?" Flickerfire feels a flicker of pity in his chest, but it's pushed down by anger.

"That's no excuse," Flickerfire growls, all pity gone, "Is that you're next reason for what you did? You're *hurt?"* Sagestar pauses, turning his eyes onto his brother, and Flickerfire feels somehow unnervingly *seen.*

"You've drowned before, right, Flick?" The old nickname makes Flickerfire flinch. The old memory makes Flickerfire flinch too, but mostly the affectionate nickname.

"Um...-"

"Did you ever get so deep it was easier to just swim down?" Sagestar's eyes are cold, emotionless, uncomfortably so. Flickerfire feels pure fear sink in his stomach.

"No," Flickerfire says carefully, "But you're not drowning. Smoothpearl is, Fringestrike is, we all are. *Because of you."* Sagestar bares his teeth, paws scuttling as they turn. Flickerfire can see the rocky cliff where Tansypaw died now, and it makes him want to vomit. He was there, wrestling with a tom two times his size. Then the battle had stopped, and the cries had started, and Flickerfire had watched as Sagestar explained away the battle with Tansypaw, somehow not believing. Somehow feeling terrible for not.

"I know," The tom's smile is small, content, "But now I accept that perhaps I did wrong. Now I have no regrets. It's weird, but I'm swimming down." Sagestar pads onto the rocks, stretching. Flickerfire feels awkward and scared. This is uncomfortable. Sagestar is just...fine? Fine with hurting, with killing? Before he'd

rejected the idea of being a murderer, of being a bad cat, but now he's accepting it, and he's just fine? Flickerfire is *scared.*

"We have to look for Mallardkit," The tom says anxiously, looking around, "Mallard-"

"Mallardkit isn't coming back," Sagestar's voice is angry, frustrated. It reminds Flickerfire of when Myrtlekit would spit insults and Flickerfire had to try to translate, purposely saying the wrong things as to not offend her siblings. The she-kit would get angrier and angrier until she'd just give up.

"Wha-"

"Swimming down, remember?" Sagestar growls, "I don't care who I hurt anymore. Smoothpearl, Mallardkit, *you."*

Flickerfire stumbles back. He isn't safe here.

Sagestar growls, stepping forward. "You and Smoothpearl were exclusive to me since I was a kit. You we're jealous, right? I got your mentor, your father, your talent. *I hate you, Flickerfire."*

Flickerfire skitters back like an exposed fawn. His breath hitches, and he hiccups air in. Is he going to die to his own brother, alone and scared? Like Mallardkit probably died. He tries to breath normally and make his voice level, but it shakes. "So you're going to kill me?"

"Not me," Sagestar says smoothly, flicking his tail. His tail-tip points at the rocks. Flickerfire's stomach drops, and as he turns-

The world slows as Flickerfire's head slams into the rock, staining them with blood. Red pours out of his cracked forehead and the tom lets out a screech, struggling out from under Sagestar dizzily. "Please," he hears himself say, backing away from his psychotic brother. Black spots dance in his vision. *"Please stop."*

Sagestar laughs.

The tom darts forward and Flickerfire darts back. His hind paws touch rough, bumpy stone, until they don't anymore. They fall, and

so do tiny rock fragments. Flickerfire scrabbles, blood from his head dripping down and staining stone. The tom shakes the blood down, watching it drip. How will Sagestar explain away so much blood? He won't.

Flickerfire's forepaws paws flail in air, and he realizes he's finally fallen. His blue eyes dart to Sagestar and then the rocks, and then back again. Flickerfire blinks right before he falls, redirecting his eyes to the trees. They are beautiful, gorgeous, even. Flickerfire focuses on the almost non-existent and birdsong. Not Sagestar's cruel laugh. Not the sound of Flickerfire screeching. Finally, as the tom is a millisecond before crashing into sharp stones, he smiles. He will not die afraid. He will not die looking at his brother's face. He will not die sad.

Goodbye world.

Chapter 48-

Flickerfire blinks at the new starry world, the world he'd been waiting for.

After death it was just black and then blinding white and then pain. Red hot pain as Flickerfire falls. The blurred white turns fluffy, and Flickerfire realizes they are clouds. He flies past them, dropping rapidly back onto earth. Flickerfire blinks. He's heard of reincarnation. Is that's what happened now? He's being shoved into a body? Flickerfire blinks again, wondering. He's never wanted to come to life again. Death is death. You're supposed to stay dead. Living under Sagestar again would feel like *pain.*

Flickerfire's answer comes quickly as he smacks to the ground. He scans his area. Field with trees studded in the ground. The leaves are beautiful and green, looking fake, fabricated, as Flickerfire stares up at them. There is a kind of sweet-smelling red ball hanging from them, perhaps a type of berry? But huge, that's for sure. The grass is tall and popping up in thin shreds.

"Flick! You're here!" a chipper voice coos, and Flickerfire's chest flickers with an immeasurable amount of joy. He doesn't recognize the voice clearly, but it makes his heart swell with pure joy. It confuses the tom as he turns and blinks at a small orange-furred kit. His eyes fail to drop the kit in the category of 'recognition,' but the tom *does* know. This kit is important. Important to Starclan, to him, in some way.

"H-Hi?" Flickerfire says with cautious kindness, "...Where am I?" The orange kit giggles, her tail lashing into a wide curled position.

"The kit place in Starclan! Did you see the butterflies? I used to love butterflies," despite her almost sad face the kit looks infinitely

happy, "Did you?" Did? So Flickerfire really is dead.

The memory of Sapkit and Cricketkit playing with the bee comes suddenly, and Flickerfire feels like crying. "Yes. I liked bees more, though." The orange kit blinks in surprise and disgust.

"Oh...'kay?" The kit shrugs, "That's alright. Come meet Milkweedkit and Thistlekit! They're both she-kits." The orange kit's smile doesn't waver, but a look of realization flashes in her eyes. "Wait...do you like she-cats? All the others like she-cats but Snapstar didn't..." The kit hums thoughtfully, looking curiously at Flickerfire.

"Uh, well of course," the white tom nods, thinking dully of Smoothpearl, "Will I go back to...Thunderclan? And see Smoothpearl again?" The orange kit grins like she's been waiting for this question.

"Yep! And much more!" she squeaks, "We can watch any cat, any time, and in any clan!"

"I mean..."

The orange kit blinks. "Oh. Well...no." The kit's smile returns, but it's clearly bogged down by concern. "But it's fun here in Starclan, promise! We can go anywhere, anytime, and...we can welcome new residents. That's what I do. Mostly kits do it, but you can too. You can-" The kit is rambling, voice increasingly more anxious. She really wants Flickerfire to like it here, doesn't she?

"Hey um..." Flickerfire flicks his tail to get the rambling kit's attention, "What...What's your name?" The orange kit blinks.

"It'd make you sad to know."

"Please...?" Flickerfire thinks he knows, but he needs confirmation.

"Oh...okay," the kit sighs, "I'm...Maplekit." Flickerfire blinks. He knew it.

"Don't be sad!" Maplekit squeaks anxiously, "I'm happy here! I've been everywhere, and I got to see you. Oh, and I have Milkweedkit and Thistlekit! They're...your real siblings. Like...not half or

anything." Maplekit's eyes light again. "I know you're sad, but Milkweedkit and Thistlekit will want to meet you. Please?" Flickerfire hums thoughtfully.

"After," he starts, voice quiet, "After can we see Mallardkit...?" Flickerfire's voice is hopeful and desperate. Maplekit's eyes shine.

"Of course! He's in Windclan, but first," the kit's voice is sing-song, "Milkweedkit and Thistlekit. Now." Flickerfire nods hesitantly, silently dying inside. Relief and pain washes over him. How had Mallardkit been brought to Windclan? Is he safe there? *Yet...he isn't dead. That counts for something, right?*

"Oh...okay," Flickerfire agrees hesitantly, acceptance flickering in his chest. *I'm dead. No more free passes. I'm dead. Goodbye Smoothpearl.*

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"Where's Mally?" Myrtlekit yawns, her mouth splitting in a silent showcase of sleepiness. Sagestar tries not to flinch, keeping his voice level as he answers, looking at Smoothpearl.

"His scent has been traced to the Windclan border. He must've wandered there-"

"Windclan?" Smoothpearl's voice shakes as she spits the world, like it's crowfood, "That's not right. No tired kit could wander there, that far, without any cat noticing." Sagestar blinks, forcing his fur to stand up.

"I don't know. Maybe Windclan saw him and thought he was abandoned-" Smoothpearl growls lowly.

"He wasn't! He's Thunderclan...He had my scent on him, they had to know," the she-cat rambles, eyes wild, "Starclan, is this because of us, because of Voidflicker?" Her voice is a mere whisper, breathless and terrified. "My kit is gone because of...because our stupid heritage?" Sagestar voice lowers, and he resists a smile. He's been waiting for this, expecting to have to feed Smoothpearl the idea. She'd thought of it herself. That means trust in Windclan is
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dwindling.

"We don't know that," Sagestar asserts, though he allows his voice to shake uncertainly. Smoothpearl's eyes flash. "We can't assume they know-"

"It's common sense!" Smoothpearl hisses out, wrapping her bristling tail around her remaining three kits, "We have to find Mallardkit, we have to find-" Sagestar shows his teeth, pulling his lips from them.

"Shut up. Give me some time. Do you want to run straight into a bloody battle?" the tom snarls. He's acting stressed, but he knows what they'll do. They will battle, just not now. Later. First he needs to find Flickerfire's body. He'll cry, vomit maybe, but not screech. Sure they were brothers, but they weren't close whatsoever. The tears will be silent, choking tears. Nothing dramatic, nothing world-breaking. He'd quietly explain to Ravenkit the concept of death, where Flickerfire will go, where Sagestar won't. But he won't say that. He'll say good cats go to Starclan and Ravenkit will squeak 'me too?' and Sagestar will shrug sadly.

Sagestar watches Smoothpearl's reaction. It's a breakdown. The she-cat chokes on her own tears while her three remaining bundles of fur ask desperately what's wrong, scrambling on her head to lick her tears. Sagestar turns silently, walking into the group of worried Riverclan and Thunderclan cats. His tail is barely higher than the ground, his face engraved in a expression of worry and anger.

"Sagestar?" Cedarmist's voice carries hesitantly over the bustle of camp talk. Sagestar turns, still bristling.

"What?"

"We uh...we found Mallardkit's blood at the border..." Sagestar's eyes widen slightly. Blood? That wasn't supposed to happen. Mallardkit is still supposed to be *alive,* just not *here.* Sagestar tries to keep his face smooth and calm.

"How much?"

"Not that much, perhaps he got cut? No body, and his scent trails over the-"

"Border?" Sagestar finishes, "So, did they hurt him?" Cedarmist hesitates on this question, his lips pursing before he shakes his head.

"The blood was on a bramble, he probably got stuck there and then maybe Windclan found him. Either way, we should conduct a patrol to talk to Scarletstar-"

"No," Sagestar growls, "They very clearly knew. He must've had some Thunderclan scent on him. They *took* him." The leader lashes his tail, a sense of thrill coursing through his veins like adrenaline during a battle. "Any patrol will be a battle patrol." Cedarmist blinks, clearly realizing, before he swallows a bit, turning away.

"Yes, our liege."

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"Momma?"

Flickerfire blinks down at the kit that can't see him, in a clan of cats that can't see him, and he feels seen. Mallardkit is looking directly into Flickerfire's pupils, and he blinks, eyes full of love. Flickerfire wants to shiver, but then the kit blinks, and suddenly his gaze is confused, and he turns his eyes away.

Flickerfire wants to cry.

"This is Mallardkit?" Milkweedkit, a tiny white she-cat with sleek, smoothed down, fur asks, confused. Her brother, Thistlekit, another tiny white she-cat with orange eyes, swishes her tail.

"Duh. Why's he calling for Smoothpearl? She's obviously gone," the tom says bluntly, his eyes holding no compassion. Flickerfire's heart aches at the thought, feeling heavy. Milkweedkit rolls her wide green eyes.

"You called for mom," the she-cat looks like she's telling an inside joke. The sentence isn't long or wordy, but it's the fact that
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Flickerfire knows when these kits called for Aloestar that hurts. *Poor kits.*

Thistlekit doesn't even flinch.

"How do you even remember that?" The kit asks, with an indignant huff. Milkweedkit laughs coldly.

"It's the only thing we've ever done. Died."

Flickerfire flinches, itching to change the subject. "Are you sure he can't see me? He looked at me-"

"Oh, he probably could," Thistlekit informs matter-of-factually, "Sometimes, the first cat you choose to visit after death can see you. Me and Milkweed chose Aloestar, and she hung onto me and told me not to go. I promised her I'd be with her until sun high, and just to know I'd be there even if she couldn't see me." The kit shrugs. "But now she's here, so I snuggle up with her every night. Maplekit too. You should join." Flickerfire smiles.

"What...What about Maplekit?" Milkweedkit laughs out-loud, joined by Thistlekit who absolutely cracks up. Flickerfire blinks. What's so funny? It's death. Perhaps the kits are desensitized to it now, but-

"Starclan! It was strange, but she chose Snapstar."

"Snapstar?" The surprise and tint of anger slips into Flickerfire's tone, but Thistlekit catches it quickly and shakes her head.

"No, no. She was happy she could sneak into dreams, and she did so with Snapstar. She made him experience what he did to her." She laughs, her eyes, somehow not a light kit blue, twinkling. "I wasn't alive, but she told me all about. He cried for her to stop." Flickerfire frowns. He doesn't think it's funny. He thinks it's sad these kits can't just rejoice at normal kit things, like becoming an apprentice or winning at moss ball.

"Why...Why couldn't I talk to Mallardkit...? He just looked away..."

"I dunno," Thistlekit shrugs her tiny shoulders, "Sometimes it doesn't even work. Be thankful." Flickerfire sighs, sitting down.

Maplekit had taken the white tom to meet Thistlekit and Milkweedkit directly after his arrival. The kits had looked at him with pity, and then excitement when they found out who he was. Their brother. Their blood. Flickerfire had been recruited onto their moss ball team and then he met a flurry of more kits. Troutkit from Riverclan, who shouldn't be trusted-- he's on the opposite moss ball team. Melonkit, from Shadowclan, an ally. Urchinkit, another trusted member of the moss ball. Thunderclan, Shadowclan, Windclan, and Riverclan, all mixing in Starclan. The kits, at least. Flickerfire hadn't received a tour, not yet, but he had seen the warriors splitting into factions, each watching a few younger kits. Flickerfire has decided already that he'll stray away from the warriors and stay with the kits. That seems right.

"He's safe. That's all that matters." The words feel foreign on Flickerfire's tongue. The tom knows that isn't right. It isn't all that matters. What matters is that he's alone, in a strange place, in a strange clan. How can that be okay? It isn't. And Flickerfire *knows* Sagestar somehow did it.

"Did I...fail?" Flickerfire asks suddenly, eyeing his paws. Milkweedkit blinks.

"What? Fail what? It's not your fault you-"

"I didn't find Sagestar fast enough. I didn't kill..." The tom trails off. He was killed by his own brother. The realization crushes him. He hadn't had time to think about, but now he does and it hurts. He was murdered by his brother and yet...the thought of killing him by any means is painful and feels like a boulder lying still on top of him.

"It's fine," Thistlekit flicks her tail dismissively, "Think we put all the burden on you? Maplekit gave Smoothpearl the message too. "Oh, and Maplekit made sure Sagestar only got one life." The kit looks devious as she snickers. Milkweedkit smiles, clearly remembering.

"She put us all together to scare him! It was funny. He started breathing strangely and his eyes widened. It was silly," Milkweedkit flicks her tail into a bouncing curl, "Anyways, Smoothpearl will do it, once she finds out what happened to her kit. She doesn't need to

know the rest." Flickerfire blinks. The rest? His death, Mallardkit...more?

"What else did he do...?"

"He killed Cricketkit, Lilypatch, Tansypaw, Voidflicker, Aloesta-"

"What?" Flickerfire's voice is covered in disbelief as he growls out the world. Aloestar? Their mother? He'd been too stunned to say anything about the rest, but now his body shakes, and true grief washes over him.

"Oh." Thistlekit breathes, her pelt pricking, "Sorry." Milkweedkit scuffs at the ground guiltily.

"Let's talk about something else," Flickerfire speaks now, his voice low, "In Starclan, please." He can't bare to look at Mallardkit, at the real world anymore. The real world is cold, starless.

Like the Dark Forest.

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Flickerfire is crying.

No, sobbing.

His head is pushed into Aloestar's long white ruff, breathing in the scent of her mane, which smells like warm fur and poppies. Her scent is Thunderclan and love and security and home. He'd taken it for granted until it was replaced by the aroma of blood and mud down on the real world. Now he won't, ever again. He'll never take her for granted again. Never. Ever.

Maplekit had showed Aloestar to her son. Flickerfire had blinked. Blinked again. Her face, smiling, tears glittering. Not engraved in a permanently terrified, cold, dead, expression. They'd run to each, tears already coming. Sure, it isn't the same as living. Aloestar's pelt is not soft anymore, feeling light and weightless, and her snow-white fur is embedded with stars. But so is Flickerfire's, so they are the same. Equal. Both dead.
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"Yay!" Flickerfire hears Thistlekit cheer. Milkweedkit giggles. Flickerfire's vision is blurry through tears, but he sees Maplekit grinning.

"I love you," Flickerfire chokes happily. Aloestar's throat vibrates with a purr.

"I love you too," The she-cat pulls away, eyes twinkling and mouth curled into a smile, "I always will."

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yes, this will be Flickerfire's last pov. i'm not opposed to you guys writing more of his pov by yourself if you want! just telling you, because i don't want you guys to be discouraged by it. you can do art to, but no claiming characters! this is like a mini end to the story, but we still have four more chapters!!

if i do write more for flick it'll be in my little bits of writing. thanks for sticking around long enough to get to this milestone ((: I LOVE YOU GUYS!!!
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Chapter 49-

Sagestar remembers. He remembers the world through the colorful filter of kit eyes. He remembers staring at a puddle and seeing his face, grinning, looking back at him. His eyes were green. Like Snapstar's. Like nature and grass and life. But now they are duller. Put through the filter of adult eyes, of sad, dull, green eyes, they are lifeless. Cold, even.

Sagestar remembers. He remembers seeing Flickerkit through the colorful filter of kit eyes. He remembers waking, seeing twinkling, blue eyes. He'd just woken from a dream. A dream of accusing blue eyes.

When Flickerfire died he looked away. His blue eyes, sharp with pain and betrayal, looked away. His face, streaked with blood, turned away. Accusing blue eyes turned away. The world turned towards them. Watching, judging, looking, but not seeing. Not seeing Sagestar's eyes glitter with tears. Not seeing him questioning what he'd just done. Not seeing, like Flickerfire hadn't.

When Flickerfire died he looked away.

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Flickerfire is dead.

For everyone else, it was an accident. A slip off the rocks. For Sagestar it was him snapping, anger taken out on his brother. But for everyone else it was an accident.

Sagestar doesn't regret it. He doesn't even cry that hard. But he does cry. Real tears. Tears for the piece of himself that's lost. The innocent, big-eyed kit, correcting himself after calling Snapstar dad. Soon he'd correct himself again, and not for formality. Soon he'd jump on Flickerfire, not play fighting soon. Soon he'd sneak out of camp with a kit, and not Flickerfire. Soon everyone related to him would die, and it's because of him. It's not kit play. It's not pretend. It's awful and heart-breaking but it's a sense twisted victory because victory is winning, and even if not emotionally, Sagestar is.
~~~

Sagestar remembers being a kit. He remembers Aloestar, in the kittish haze of perfection that all kits have for their parents. It's born out of necessity, right? If kits don't adore their parents they die. If they refuse to drink they die. If they refuse to huddle close in a cold night they die. But now that shield is dissolved. It's gone like a shred of grass in a rapidly moving river. But it remains in some ways. The way Sagestar was hesitant to kill Aloestar, the way it felt wrong to sleep in her old nest after becoming leader. Is that winning?

Is *this* winning?

Is watching Flickerfire's vigil with red-rimmed eyes from the top of his den while Smoothpearl is stomaching two losses winning? Is having a mentally tired clan to lead winning? Is seeing Rustkit, Myrtlekit, and Snailkit, asking where 'Mally' went winning?

Sagestar scans his eyes over the camp. Broken, dismantled, bleak. He sees it through the sad filter of adult eyes, the world a patch of black and white, the only color now a deep shade of crimson red.

"Sagestah, why does Stahclan take good cats?" Ravenkit's voice is sad and strained. He isn't really grieving like most of the clan- he didn't even say goodbye - but he still can probably sense the atmosphere. Tense, tight, and depressive.

Sagestar has always disliked Ravenkit a bit. His pathetic way of speaking, his huge kittish eyes. Sure, kits are clingy and fragile. Sure, they're hard to raise. Yet... Sagestar still dislikes the kit. The way he'd cry for 'mommy' has always rubbed him the wrong way. Sagestar had been a kit once. Small, tiny, even. A broken, twisted, limb, and a small, hopeful, voice. It feels far away, but is it really? Is it far away or uncomfortably close? Sagestar doesn't know. He hates not knowing.

"No cat is good," Sagestar growls, cold anger seeping through him. He feels empty. His chest hurts as he watches Branchheart and Quailflinch slowly advance towards his brother. "Flickerfire wasn't a good cat."

Sagestar is lying. His brother was good, he was. Even Sagestar

recognizes that. The tom was caring, at least as a kit, and he was sweet. Did he *ever* break the code? Sagestar doesn't think so. Yet he threatened Sagestar. That breaks the code, right? Doesn't it? Sagestar doesn't know, but that feels right. The orange and white tom flicks his tail around the little black Ravenkit. The kit shudders, pushing closer into Sagestar.

"Not even you?"

"What?" Sagestar's voice is dripping with venom.

"You're not a good cat either?" Sagestar wants to claw the oblivious kit's face off.

"No," the orange and white tabby tom spits aggressively, "I'm not." Ravenkit's eyes flash with worry and fear. Fear of his pseudo father? Sagestar doesn't know.

Suddenly Ravenkit crawls into the space between Sagestar's two front paws, standing on his hind paws to reach the leader's face. His tongue comes out, licking away Sagestar's nearly dried tears.

"I think you are."

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"Sagestar."

The voice is familiar, but also somewhat new. It isn't kind or calm. Not angry either. It's amused.

"Lacewing." Sagestar answers, scanning his surroundings. It seems the forest had gotten unnervingly dark. It's trees are skinny and dying, the bark peeling in thin, dark, strips. The grass is bogged out by mud, which Sagestar is coincidentally standing in. The tom side-steps with an audible grumble. "I know it wasn't right to kill Flickerfire. It was a-" The she-cat laughs. Loudly.

"You think I care who you kill," the she-cat snorts, eyes glittering. Sagestar feels unease settle in side.

"Wh-"
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"Let me tell you a story, Sagestar. Have you ever been curious about my time down in the world?" Sagestar blinks. He isn't a kit. He isn't here for story telling.

"Kind of," the tom settles on, eyes narrowed. "What's the story about?" Lacewing's whiskers twitch.

"My death," the she-cat answers, eyes looking glossy.

"I know how you died. You were-"

"Shut up!" the she-cat's voice is dangerous, "You don't know anything about me. You never cared." Sagestar lets a growl emit from his throat, fear dampening his insides before he catches himself.

"Fine. Tell me."

Lacewing smiles.

"When I was younger I was raised as a kitty pet. I was named Spots. But that's doesn't matter, does it? It doesn't matter how I got my name or my spot in a rogue group. I just did," Lacewing flicks her tail, almost dismissively, "We had territory. Technically we were like a clan. If you trespassed..." Lacewing looks distant. "A cat was trespassing. Apprentice, maybe? I killed him. My own paws did it." Lacewing laughs coldly. Sagestar feels surprise course through him.

"You killed-"

"Don't interrupt me," the she-cat hisses angrily, "It was your uncle, apparently. Aloestar knew it was me, I suppose. I was gutted." Lacewing's voice rises, "For some reason, I'm here. The Dark Forest."

"What?" Sagestar's voice is breathless, "No, this is-"

"Shut up," Lacewing laughs, "That's an unfair death, correct? Killed for defending territory. But now everyone you love is gone. Aloestar, Flickerfire, Snapstar. You killed your own mother!" The she-cat laughs, her pelt rippling. "You're so gullible. So pathetic. Soon you'll join us here." Sagestar's blood runs cold, and he advances forward teeth bared.

"You-"

"No, this was your doing," Lacewing laughs, "I've gotten what I want, and so have you. Me, to kill Aloestar, and you, to be leader." The black and light gray ticked tabby laughs.

"One more thing," Lacewing says smoothly, eyes glimmering with triumph, "I hope you suffer."

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short and sweet!! rapid fire updates from now on. we're so close!!!! (:
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Chapter 50-

Sagestar feels empty, again, for the second time, as he wakes. He arises alert, infinitely so, fur bristling and teeth bared. His limbs burn with energy, energy that betrays him.

Nothing matters anymore. Every cat has betrayed him.

Sagestar doesn't care. Not anymore. But energy has to go somewhere. And Sagestar has an idea where. Into battle.

Sagestar rises from his nest, idly shaking moss from his short-furred pelt. Ravenkit rouses, looking tiredly up and the leader. His shining eyes are dull with exhaustion, and his jaws part in a large yawn that shakes his whole body. "N-New day?" Sagestar blinks.

"Sure."

"'Kay!" Ravenkit yawns, too lazy to say the first part of the word, "Why awe we up so eawey?" Sagestar flicks his feathery tail.

"We're going to attack Windclan today," the orange tom shrugs simply, eyes sharp with adrenaline, "If we win, they might surrender." Ravenkit stretches, nodding excitedly with one more yawn and grumble.

"Sawender!" He squeaks excitedly, "Is bwattle fun?" Sagestar blinks.

"Bwattle?" The tom repeats with contempt. "You can say that word." Ravenkit blinks, looking hurt.

"Sorry," he says, looking ashamed, "B-Battle. Is it fun?" Sagestar shrugs again, thinking.

"It's...thrilling," the tom finishes, shaking one more time, "You have two moons until you'll be Ravenpaw. Then you can battle." Ravenkit purrs, grinning. It's endearing.

"Wavenpaw!" the kit trills, little tail lashing as he pulls himself up, "Pwetty!" Sagestar flicks his tail, body shaking in excitement. "Why can't it be soonah?"

"Soon*er."* Sagestar corrects almost aggressively. Ravenkit nearly deflates as the leader continues. "Anyways, that'd be breaking the code. You'd get hurt." Ravenkit's eyes flash with indignant anger.

"No! I'm stwong! Pomise!"

Sagestar laughs coldly. "We'll see. Do you want to watch the meeting or sleep in?" Ravenkit huffs, and then hums, in thought.

"Hawd choice! Hmm...meeting...!"

"'Kay, you can sit on the rock with me or sit with *Wavekit,"* the last word is said with poorly hidden disdain. Ravenkit blinks, shaking his long black pelt.

"Um..." the kit huffs thoughtfully, "You! Smoothpeawl's kits always get jealous when I do!" The kit makes a joyful chirping noise. "I'm excited!"

Sagestar nods. "Me too."

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The battle patrol is huge.

The earth is wet with dew, the treeless landscape making Windclan's territory seem bigger and more intimidating than it is. A few stray bushes make themselves at home in the dried-out and cracking soil. Dust rolls in clouds. Will there be a storm? Sagestar doesn't completely care.

Windclan camp is depressing yet rich with bad memories. Sagestar remembers Voidflicker's one green eye, shining with triumph as he announced their parentage. Sagestar remembers the hare they'd shared, it's beady eyes wide open, staring, observing. Seeing. Seeing three scared apprentices stripped from what they love, stripped from home because of a greedy desire.
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What is Mallardkit seeing now?

Sagestar tries not to wonder. It's counter-productive. He's done this to Mallardkit by his own will, fueled by his own anger. He doesn't quite regret it yet, he regrets nothing, but it sure is hard to manage on his conscience. If Voidflicker did roughly the same thing and he was a bad cat...

"Sagestar...should we go to the nursery first?" Smoothpearl's voice rips Sagestar from his head, and he glances sideways, taking in the image of the scrawny she-cat. She'd begged to come, quite persistently, too, leaving her kits with the elders. Probably still asking where 'Mally' is.

"No. We should focus on making them surrender first. Maybe not today, but we'll get Mallardkit back." The lie feels hot and thick on Sagestar's tongue. Smoothpearl nods tensely, unspoken anger flashing in her eyes. Good. She's irritated. Cats with a reason to hurt fight better.

"How do we make them surrender?" Sappaw's voice is small, almost scared, as she asks. Sagestar's eyes shift to the apprentice, his glance lingering on her. It's a good question. Had Sagestar really thought they could just burst into camp and win? The tom pauses and thinks, watching the yellowish she-cat with thoughtful eyes.

"We attack from the sides. Target only warriors," Sagestar pauses, "I'm permitting you to kill any cat over six moons old." The patrol explodes in quiet whispers of disapproval, but Sagestar doesn't care.

"Sappaw, you are not there to fight," Sagestar reminds the young apprentice, "Observe from somewhere you can see, and run back and fetch the back-up patrol if needed." Sagestar flinches at the idea of them losing, but Sappaw is fast, and they'll come back with twice as many cats.

"Okay," the tiny she-cat nods, and Smoothpearl licks the brave apprentice's ear. Sagestar watches with limited interest. He watches his clan. Observing. He's barely noticed some cats before, side characters in his life. But now he does, and he's almost touched.

Orejump, a grieving father. Grieving because of Sagestar. His eyes dreary and lifeless, his paws moving slowly and his mouth constantly shut. Never moving. Not bothering to. Not bothering to speak.

Frigidcall and Minnowrose, both quiet cats with sad eyes and burdened muscles. They should be in the elder's den. They shouldn't be fighting. Not like Sagestar had noticed. But he does now, he does notice. He wants to scream. He isn't a monster. He does notice.

Yewmist. Sagestar wants to physically recoil at the name. They used to be friends. They talked about kits. Sagestar has never liked them. Yewmist always has. And now he's just...in the background. Alone, grieving, cold eyes. Sagestar has barely noticed, but he does now, he notices everything now. The hunch in his shoulders, the cold, barren, laughs he makes after a joke. It's Sagestar's fault. It all is.

Sagestar thought he was only hurting Smoothpearl. Only Flickerfire, only Fringestrike. But there's so many cats. His whole clan is grieving, and it's his fault. *It's all his fault.*

Sagestar blinks. He'd killed cats for good. Wrong thing, right reason. But still, his clanmates are hurt. Sagestar feels nothing. No remorse, no empathy. He's done virtually nothing wrong, but... he's still hurt cats.

Sagestar can't fix that now though.

The tom presses through a prickly bush of some kind, eyes cold. He'll try to fix it though. He will. They'll win this war and then it'll all be okay.

Everything will be fine.

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The sound of battle rages in Sagestar's ears. His eyes shift, shift, as he scans the battle ground. Cedarmist yowls as he rakes his unsheathed claws down Gorseslip's nose. The Windclan tom recoils, dodging Cedarmist's next attack clumsily before attempting to slip under the Cedarmist's belly. It doesn't work, to say the least, and the
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tiny tom gets kicked in the head with a crack.

Smoothpearl fights a large tom with yellow eyes near Sagestar, skillfully weaving around the tom. For a split second, Smoothpearl looks to be retreating, her paw raised in a limp and her ears back. The brown tom, perhaps Trunkjump, maybe, grins condescendingly.

"Mighty Smooth-"

Smoothpearl grins back, wheeling around. Her apparently hurt paw hits the ground but she doesn't so much as wince. Sagestar blinks, impressed. She was faking? She was faking. Sagestar turns before Trunkjump's yowl of pain is heard, dilated pupils resting on the battle. No clan is winning quite yet, though the ground is sticky with blood and the yowls seemingly carry all the way to Thunderclan camp.

It seems Shadowclan has remained neutral through the war. Windclan is just Windclan, no strange mix like Riverclan and Thunderclan is now. But that makes them weak. Weaker, at least, which is good for Sagestar. Bad for Windclan, not like Sagestar cares.

A weight crashes onto Sagestar's back.

Sagestar stifles a startled yowl, legs buckling under his light, thin, body. He crumbles like a leaf under a hefty paw. He shouldn't have been watching, sure, but does he deserve to be crushed? The tom makes a strangled gasping sound as he struggles to breathe, his breath hiccuping in his throat. Large reddish brown paws weigh on his spine, one shifting into view. Sagestar struggles, energy dabbed away almost instantly.

"Scarletpaw," he squeaks, "Get off of me. Lets fight the real way." His plea is pathetic.

"Scarletstar," the she-cat corrects, and Sagestar can feel that she is grinning, "And...no. I think I'll kill you from up here." Sagestar blinks, fear not yet reaching his chest.

"Sure." He tries not to let his voice shake.

Claws sink deeper into Sagestar's neck, and he considers playing dead. But no, that wouldn't work. *Probably* not, at least.

"Not joking," Scarletstar hisses. *I can tell by your claws in my neck,* Sagestar wants to snap, but he doesn't want to waste his breath. His claws scrabble at the dirt, and his lungs fail him. He feels them screech for air. Is he going to be suffocated, just like this? Sagestar struggles to think as black spots dance and twirl around his vision. Is he actually going to die? It sounds fake.

The weight leaves.

Sagestar gasps, the cool oxygen entering his lungs feels amazing, almost like drinking water after running laps. Like breathing after your air is cut off and your choking, drowning, *dying-*

But Sagestar's okay now. At least, almost, as the tom stands on shaky legs, panting. The battle doesn't stop, doesn't pause, and Sagestar is in the middle of it all, feeling quickly returning to his legs. The static feeling of numbness still creeps over Sagestar's paws, but he'll be okay. His eyes creep to Smoothpearl and Scarletstar, both of which yowling in fury and spitting insults at each other.

Smoothpearl tussles with Scarletstar near Sagestar. The brownish-red she-cat brings a heavy paw down on Smoothpearl's head and Smoothpearl sinks her canines into Scarletstar's paw. Both she-cats screech like enraged dogs.

Sagestar stumbles forward, teeth bared. He's still shaky, but he can manage, especially with Smoothpearl fighting by his side. The she-cat has always been a strong fighter, stronger than Flickerfire, anyways. Aloestar was probably proud of her. Sagestar's claws dig into soil as he thinks about it. Her only she-kit to live. She'd probably liked Smoothpearl more from the beginning. The though makes Sagestar lunge forward with unmeasured rage.

Scarletstar's eyes narrow calculatingly. Smoothpearl lashes out at her with a single fore paw, eyes dark with rage as she bares her

teeth angrily. "Kit takers!" she yowls, leaping forward as well. The she-cat looks violent like this, neck ruff puffed out and muscle twisted in a snarl promising malice. Sagestar's never seen his sister like this. But he has now. He definitely has.

Scarletstar's eyes flicker with amusement, whiskers twitching. Her gaze flicks to Sagestar's, holding it like a sacred piece of prey. The she-cat smirks, eyes flashing with kittish mischief.

"I'm not the only kit taker."

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two more chapters! we're so close, and the ending is coming up!! I hope you enjoyed this one :)
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Chapter 51-

Time slows. Scarletstar's eyes glow with malice and amusement as she leaps forward, teeth snapping at Smoothpearl's ears. The she-cat barely flinches, eyes focused on Scarletstar in confusion. Her eyes are still filled with rage, but also confusion, like a fox kit after seeing a praying mantis take the butterfly they were chasing. Now Smoothpearl is frozen, eyes flashing with a mix of strong emotions. Sagestar's probably do too. Terror and anger mix in the tom's stomach, making him want to vomit.

What?

"What? Think your scent is invisible?" Scarletstar snorts, rolling her eyes, "If I remember correctly, Mallardkit came whining about how Smoothpearl left him, mingled with crying about a cat named Bluebell. Know about that?" The she-cat laughs coldly. Sagestar glances to his sister.

The she-cat is terrifyingly calm. Her facial expression is smooth and well-rounded, like she hadn't just learned the truth about her missing kit. Like her brother isn't sitting uselessly there. Like she knows where her kit is, that he's safe. Like she doesn't know her kit isn't safe in the clan. Like her world isn't falling apart.

Sagestar turns his gaze back to Scarletstar, teeth bared and voice shaking. "Liar." Scarletstar laughs coldly again, her laugh like windchimes and malice.

"Sure. Anyways, Thunderclan isn't seeing Mallardkit until Sagestar is gone," the she-cat says, looking directly at Smoothpearl. Smoothpearl growls. Scarletstar laughs.

Sagestar wants to die.

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The battle doesn't stop, doesn't pause, but that feels wrong. It feels like the world should stop. It feels like everyone should turn their heads and gasp and ask, 'What?" Sagestar feels like they should be the center of attention, but no one turns. No sound eases, not even for a moment, and the battle continues steadily on.

Smoothpearl leaps at Scarletstar in slow motion, and instantly Sagestar turns tail and runs away from the scuffle. His paws land on an apprentice, wide-eyed but tiny. Her tail lashes. Her fur is huge and puffed up. Her lip is curled. Yet her frame is small, kittish, and Sagestar recognizes her from the Windclan border skirmish.

"You killed-"

Sagestar pressed his claws out, feeling nothing as he rises his paw. Sappaw's cowering form flashes in his mind, her small, rounded face and curly cheek fur. But this isn't Sappaw. This is nobody. This is an obstacle. Sagestar raises his paw and brings it down on it's face, a nothingness, a blankness, and he hears an ungodly yowl of pain. Blood sprays, and the blank slate turns into red, red, instead of blank there *is* a face. Agony. Sagestar blinks, eyes widening with horror, and he runs again.

Claws prick into Sagestar's skin and he turns, seeing eyes wild with anger. Sagestar doesn't process the words, but he processes the she-cat, Brittleleaf, maybe, leaping at him with a curled lip. Sagestar screeches and claws blindly at the she-cat. He connects with her cheek, but the hit is uncoordinated and holds no power. The unknown cat laughs.

Sagestar swings again. Shoulder. It hits the shoulder. Harder. Hard. The she-cat pulls away, anger flashing a swamp of blue eyes, and she darts forward again. She's slow. She's limping. Like Aloestar but calico, multicolored, small and weak. Like Aloestar. Like Mallardkit. Sagestar bites down on neck ruff and skin and throws the she-cat away. She crashes into the dust with a huge sound, like an explosion, and weakly lifts her head just to bare her teeth.

"Evil Thunderclan mange-pelt-"

Sagestar turns away, looking around the bloodied Windclan camp.

Blood is spread like invasive moss, clumps of bloody fur tossed around haphazardly. Sagestar blinks and still sees blood, red, *carnage.*

Sagestar blinks again and suddenly two cats are upon him, fighting the dazed tom together. Two cats. Against one. This isn't fair.

Sagestar leaps back, gaining clarity and space, and he hesitantly rakes his claws down a tan tom's nose. Blood wells, and tan the tom leaps forward, growling. "You killed Voidflicker!" The tom, who Sagestar now recognizes as Gorseslip, yowls into the sounds of battle. The she-cat beside him, an unknown silver bengal she, nods with contempt. Sagestar blinks. It's funny two cats had begun with that

"We all smelled your scent. We know." Sagestar cracks a smirk that he doesn't mean, that's fake, not truthful, and he laughs tensely.

"Who said he didn't deserve it?"

The she-cat lashes out with her claws, catching Sagestar on the shoulder and giving him a nasty cut down it. Sagestar winces, eyes blurring with pain, but he doesn't dare cry out. The tom fights back, biting down hard on the silver she-cat's ear and twisting until he hears a rip and then he yanks back, *hard.*

The she-cat screeches.

Sagestar dodges Gorseslip's coming attack. Too slow. Too predictable. The leader strikes back to Gorseslip's side, knocking him over. Sagestar bares his teeth, anger and determination slipping through him. With a raised paw he-

"Thunderclan! Retreat!"

It should hold no authority; it's not Sagestar's voice. Yet, Thunderclan listens. Cats scramble away from the Windclan cats, Riverclan included. Even Turtlesplash, with a blink of confusion, scrambles backwards. Echopaw, scrabbling with another apprentice, lashes his tail once and then claws the other cat one more time before leaving. Each cat fades from the camp, including Sagestar,

hesitantly, of course. He wants to go, he does, but he doesn't want to be forced to.

Sagestar growls gently as he retreats, searching the crowd. The cats of Windclan are smiling, smirking, maybe. Their fur is puffed up, or at least what's left of it. Clumps of missing fur expose bloodied pink and black skin, but their expressions just show joy and triumph.

Sagestar's eyes wander to Scarletstar, dread pricking at his chest. The she-cat is standing there, tail up and curled.

Subtly, slowly, she smiles.

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next chapter is the last one, get ready!! (:
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Chapter 52-

WARNING: Vivid descriptions of blood, gore, and death.

The color drains down the drain. All except red. Red splatters like blood, no, it must be. Something cracks, deep and primal, deep and painful, but he deserved it.

Did he look at the surface and see a plump kit, a kid, a child, or did he see the ambitious eyes of a monster. Does he see a scarred adult or a child, a baby, a puppet? Does he see green or red? Green eyes or red eyes? White, pure, or orange, a dictator or mediator? Death or life?

When Sagestar blinks he sees green, not red. He sees both orange and white. Life and death. Dictator and mediator. In the last seconds of his life, he saw the cats that turned red. He knows why they are red. He knows why he's back here, back here. B ut every cat has to turn red.

Everyone dies in the end.

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The ground is wet with condensation as Sagestar's paws glide over the ground, grass shreds pressed beneath. The sky and clouds open up and screech, dropping frigid rain upon them. The wind whistles, pushing the cat's ears inside out with every strong gust which carries more and more liquid until Sagestar can barely see through the haze of water and fast-moving air.

The tom leads the battle patrol home, ears pulled back against his skull and teeth chattering from the sheer force of the chilly winds. The world is dark and misty, the clouds dropped down to earth in the form of fog.

"Did they surrender?" Swanpaw, a young apprentice from Riverclan, asks hesitantly, voice laced with disappointment. Sagestar shrugs,
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teeth bared. Images of Mallardkit hunched behind Scarletstar, calling her 'momma' somehow makes Sagestar sick.

The walk home has been quiet and tense. Echopaw is limping along, Sappaw's fur is ruffled and puffed up even with the rain, and Yewmist is flanked by Smoothpearl and Fallowshard, to hurt to walk alone. The only one majorly injured is a small Riverclan tom, Urchinpaw, who's head is cracked and bleeding. Swanpaw and Echopaw hold his scruff, practically pulling him. The tom's eyes are glazed, and Sagestar doubts he'll make it.

"We fought well," Minnowrose says slowly, doubt radiating off of her. Her voice breaks the cold and hard silence, and Sagestar tosses her a glare. Right. They'd surrendered to a clan two times smaller. How is that 'fighting well?'

"We're almost there," Sagestar flicks his tail, ignoring the comment. The camp is in view, it's large stone and bramble walls towering over the patrol. Swanpaw glances upwards, his eyes widen.

"I never realized it's this big...I don't notice it a lot," the apprentice says, blinking his eyes away. Echopaw shrugs. The patrol falls back into silence as the rain gets heavier, dripping from their pelts. Sagestar grumbles. *When will this rain ease?*

The patrol ducks into camp, paws muddy and spirits drained. Their eyes filter instantly to the medicine cat's den. Warm, safe, *dry*.

Sagestar's eyes find the nursery, missing one kit. He doesn't feel his stomach twist with sickness, no, instead he feels a mix of guilt and triumph. The guilt is weak, flimsy, barely there, and the pride radiates from him. He's done this. He's built this clan, this life, he's been powerful. Sure, the guilt still shines in Yewmist's sad laughs and Myrtlekit's queries about her brother. But the triumph is stronger. He's done his, been strong enough to do this.

But still it's terrifying. Scarletstar doesn't know what she's done. She's officially turned Smoothpearl against her brother, made one more member of the clan doubt him. Sagestar feels like a kit that's been caught, a kit who's in front of leader being punished. Nervous energy courses through Sagestar.

But if you have a prey that starts to mold, just slice the moldy part off.

Smoothpearl has two options. She'll leave or die. It's that easy. What's one more death to Sagestar? Nothing.

Yewmist collapses onto Fallowshard's side as Smoothpearl leaves the two, and the tom limps in the general direction of the prey pile. The clan disperses. The somehow unscathed ones hobble into dens and the hurt limp into the medicine cat's den, now flooded with cats. Tumblecry sniffs wounds and licks small scrapes, her fur messy and eyes wide with panic. She looks somehow overwhelmed with Riverclan and Thunderclan combined. Sagestar wants to laugh. She probably misses Flickerfire.

Sagestar feels a paw prod into his gut and he blinks at the sheer force of the hit. He'll be bruised later, for sure. His side throbs a little as he turns, teeth bared into a snarl. "What the f-"

Smoothpearl's eyes blaze as Sagestar's pupils flick up to meet them. Her jaw is set in an enraged snarl, and her face is contorted into one of rage. Her fur is puffed, as if it had rippled and then multiplied in size. The she-cat's back is arched ever so slightly, as if she's warning Sagestar but no one else. Her anger is powerful and dangerous, her words sounding like fire and pure ire.

"We need to talk," the she-cat's words don't sound like an offer. They leave no room for discussion, only anticipation. Sagestar feels almost *excited* to say the words 'exiled' to his sister's face. His tail whisks around, eyes narrowing.

"Sure."

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Sagestar remembers the battle, the red, the blood. And then Tansypaw.

So long buried in bad memories, in remorse, in indifference, all come up to surface. Deep down, Sagestar does feel sad about Tansypaw's death. It was the only accidental death he'd caused, the
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first one, and it still hurts to see the image of blood pooling outside of the apprentice's mouth.

These rocks hold so many memories. Bad memories. They also hold Flickerfire's blood. Cracked skull, dead eyes, open mouth. Sagestar's laugh, cold, fake, sad. Because how else can you make yourself feel better?

These rocks symbolize death, mourning.

Is that why Smoothpearl had brought him here?

Smoothpearl is not quiet. Her feelings aren't hidden as in battle. The she-cat's muzzle curls dangerously, and her whole pelt ripples, puffed up. Her back is arched and her lips reveal sharp canines. Sagestar tries to remain calm but anger and anxiety pumps through his veins like claws tearing through muscle.

"Tell me," Smoothpearl's voice is sharp and angry, claws screeching against the sun-warmed rocks, "Tell me you didn't take him." Sagestar narrows his deep green eyes, tail lashing back and forth.

"Does it matter?" Sagestar shrugs, "You're lucky he's safe with how you've treated me." Smoothpearl's eyes flash with barely contained rage, and she laughs angrily. The chortle is pure anger condensed into a loud, tense, sound.

Sagestar sees more, however, than anger and fury. Sadness. Confusion. Weak emotions other than hate and ire. Sagestar takes advantage of his momentary high ground.

"What, do you actually miss him?" The tom snorts disdainfully, "Sure, I feel bad, but how could you miss a runt like that? He's *weak,* Smoothpearl. You wouldn't accept that, so I took him. It's *helped* you. You should *thank* me." Sagestar shrugs, pretending not to see the pure uninterrupted hurt ebb into Smoothpearl's once confident form.

"What happened?" Smoothpearl asks shakily, "We grew up together, I know what you went through, yet I still can't *guess* what went wrong." Her eyes are filled with depression, but Sagestar's body

shakes with anger. What went wrong? What went *wrong?*

"Nothing's wrong with me!" Sagestar roars, stepping forward threateningly. How could Smoothpearl make such a claim when it's so clear 'when he's went wrong.' Sagestar is *hurting.* The realization makes him sway on his paws. "I wasn't included in *anything.* You guys had already decided what was 'wrong with me' before I was even an apprentice! And what *was?* Snapstar? Was he *my fault?"* Sagestar is worked up now, wanting to pace. "Now that I'm finally powerful, finally *something,* everyone hates me for it." Sagestar's voice rises. "But no, it's *my fault.* Everything's *my fault."*

Smoothpearl's eyes are wide with fear and confusion. "I never excluded you," her voice is breathy, almost like an airy whisper, "You pushed us away, Sagestar. You always did." Sagestar blinks in rage, trying to see through his fury.

"Liar!" he screeches, storming forward. He stops in front of his sister, eyes flashing with emotions. Emotions he's always thought weak. He finally realizes who taught him that.

Snapstar.

How many more of his virtues are taught by Snapstar?

Finally, though, Sagestar remembers Cricketkit. His cries of pure agony. His soul clawing his way back into his tiny, cooling, body.

And then Maplekit, Snapstar tearing into her fur and skin and bone. Her cries of agony, her soul weeping as she's led into Starclan.

How is that different?

Sagestar's eyes pool with tears and he steps back, feeling numb. So it is his fault, isn't it? He is like Snapstar, isn't he? So much.

And Ravenkit is like...*him?*

For once, Sagestar does not reject the emotion, and he feels around the new dark space he's in. Doubt and hurt, old emotions he'd pushed away, meet him sharply. The wave of pain he's missed comes crashing down, swallowing the tom and *making* him

remember. Everything. All the pain, the glares, the blood, the sounds of pain. How has he become this? This monster, this awful cat he's strived not to be.

"I'm..." the words struggle in Sagestar's throat, stuck. Because is he really? Is this authentic? "Sorry. I'll fix this. I'll fix this all." Sagestar pauses, not stops, because something is missing. Something crucial, that Sagestar desperately wants to be. "I love you." Smoothpearl's eyes don't soften, don't fold under the apology. Her back is still arched, her head low and her jaw clenched.

"I don't care whether you love me or not," Smoothpearl growls, "I don't care if you apologize. *I don't care about you anymore,* Sagestar. *I've given up."* Her claws slide out of their sheathes, gleaming in the harsh light of sunset. The wind whistles.

"What-"

A crushing weight knocks Sagestar backwards, and he screeches as blood sprays on stone and his head cracks, leaking blood. A pair of sharp claws reach his face just as the tom chooses to cover it, and the sharp pricks reach his bare paw pads. "Smoothpearl-" The tom's ears are raked, spilling blood. The tom gasps silently, surprised at the sheer pain.

"Flickerfire died here," Sagestar hears Smoothpearl hiss, "I saw you walk out together. I barely remember. I shouldn't *have to."*

Sagestar presses out with his paws, and Smoothpearl is pushed off. Horror seizes Sagestar as he doesn't hear the sound of body on stone. Had Smoothpearl fell to her death, like so many? Like Flickerfire and Tansypaw and now... Sagestar really is a monster.

The tom stands on shaky paws, feeling a wave of nausea wash over him. His head spins from the hit to his skull, and blood taints his ginger fur. Red drips from his forehead into his eyes, blinding him and making his world red.

"Smoothpearl...?" His voice sounds distant and is interrupted by slurring and high-pitched rings that stem from inside his head. "Smooth-"

Another hit from behind stuns the tom and his legs fold, no longer working. His head blossoms into a world of red. "How many others have you killed, hurt, ruined?" Smoothpearl whispers into the tom's ears and claws sink into his back, "I could have killed you like how Flickerfire died. Quick, easy, death to the rocks. But this is how you killed others, right? Because there must've been others, correct?" Sagestar blinks back pure unhindered pain and wants to cry out-

"Cricketkit," The tom slurs, eyelids fluttering closed, "I ki-killed...him." Smoothpearl makes an enraged sound, pressing harder on his lungs.

"Who else?"

"Aloe-"

"Our mom?"

Smoothpearl's voice is wild and angry and she presses down hard on the tom's head until something *breaks.*

Smoothpearl's voice is clear, even if the world isn't. Her mew is sharp and unapologetic, her voice holding no remorse. Sagestar's heart twists as he hears the words. *I was going to change, I was going to be better...* But as the world dissipates, Sagestar hears one last voice, one last snarl, as the world leaves him.

"I hope you suffer."

~~~

and here it is! the end. next comes the epilogue then author's note. I'll go more into detail, but basically, thank you for sticking with this book. I'm so thankful for you all, and seriously, I would've quit this project without you. I LOVE YOU GUYS SO MUCH.
~~~

Epilogue-

"Plantkit!" Myrtleblossom eyes are twinkling with playful anger as she scoops her tom kit into her paws and licks him tenderly. The kit squeals in surprise, wiggling to escape the queen's grasp. Swanwave laughs beside the two, tail curled around his mate's back as she laughs.

"Momma!" Plantkit huffs, his all white body shaking with with his dramatic sigh, "Come on, lemme go play!" Swanwave gives little Plantkit a look before crouching to his level.

"No, not right now," He says smoothly, voice soft, "We're showing off your beautiful self to the clan. Let us do that, will you?" Plantkit dissolves into tears as the realization hits him. He can't play right now.

"No!" Plantkit argues, pounding his tiny paw on the ground, "I. Don't. Wanna!" Swanwave sighs. He's very clearly used to this, and his fur barely bristles.

"Sorry, little guy," he smiles reassuringly, "I see why you're upset, but we can't play now. Maybe later?" The white and gray splotched tom's eyes are soft like Snapstar never was, his voice gentle. Plantkit's voice is small and choking with tears,

"But...P-Play-"

"No playing now," Myrtleblossom cuts in, "I'm sure Minnowrose would tell you a story if you went to the elder's den. She loves kits." Plantkit sniffles.

"Sapchin's kits get to play moss ball!" the kit whines indignantly, "And they're smaller-"

"But older," Myrtleblossom cuts in with a mrrow of amusement, "Soon they'll be 'paws." Plantkit whimpers sadly.

"How's that my fault when I was born?" The kit squeaks angrily, "I'm

more mature!" The kit puffs out his chest feebly. Swanwave gives the tom a gentle lick, but his eyes are firm.

"No more playing."

~~~

Sagestar trudges through mud and red-stained peat. His paws glide over it all, fur bristling and tail lashing.

The line between two worlds is muddied with pawsteps, mostly little ones. Sagestar would know. He's seen tiny faces peeking at him as he sleeps (or tries, it's mostly unsuccessful.) Sagestar likes to wave his tail at the tiny faces; they squeal and cover their faces in fear. It's strange, having to turn away alone.

There are other cats here, obviously, but they stick to themselves, as Sagestar does. Moons of loneliness and hunger has done him in so much that kits coming to the line on a dare is excitement, and he stays to watch.

Today is no different, his eyes flicking into the sky to see the greener leaves. Sagestar will never see the stars again, he accepts that, but green leaves? That was always the reason Sagestar used to growl at the bratty kits with well-groomed pelts and nervous smiles. But now he smiles and waves, because even if they run, he needs them. This place is designed to break cats, but it hasn't broken Sagestar. He's still going. He's still *sane*.

The kits are the only innocent faces he sees. He's seen the world below him, sure, but it isn't the same. There's a fog around their faces, their happiness, and it hurts to see Smoothpearl's kits grow. Rustwobble, Myrtleblossom, Snailstreak, Mallardcrack. In the split between Riverclan and Thunderclan Snailstreak left and Mallardcrack didn't ever return to Thunderclan. He must've wanted to stay where he had the most memories. Windclan.

Smoothpearl's dead now. Every cat is. Frigidcall, Yewmist, Fallowshard. The world had moved on without Sagestar, thinking he was a bad cat.
~~~

He was going to change.

But that doesn't matter, because Smoothpearl was right.

He is suffering. He's suffering so much.

Ravenkit, now Ravenberry, is the ruler now. He has no mate, but he's a good leader. Better than Sagestar was. The clan is smaller, sadder, now, but Sagestar is fine with that. They deserve it.

Sagestar scans the greener grass on Starclan's ground. It sparkles tauntingly, it's dewy layer tantalizing. A berry bush, carrying blue berries, ruffles. The world explodes with giggles and screeches, and Sagestar freezes at the sounds. Joy. Why this close to the edge?

The tom watches silently as a kit tumbles from the bush. He stumbles back, eyes widening, as the kit turns his eyes upwards, mouth holding a huge moss ball. The same kit from his leader ceremony. Sagestar blinks. Maplekit...? The orange kit is accompanied by another cat, not a kit, not even close. He's huge and fluffy. *Flicker...*

The word is new, some-what, to Sagestar's mind, but he tries. He remembers.

"Flickerfire?"

The burly white tom looks up, and so does the kit as his paws. A few more kits peak from the bushes, eyes wide and horrified. Sagestar steps forward, wanting to reach for his kin. Flickerfire flinches back, eyes soft and calm. His tail wraps around a scared kit, who snuggles closer into his white fur.

Flickerfire tilts his head and blinks. The tom swishes his tail.

And then smiles.

Sagestar blinks, surprised by the reaction, but then Flickerfire turns away, disappearing behind the bush, and the gaggle of kits follow like a sheep's flock. Sagestar stands staring, wanting to crawl over the line and beg for forgiveness. But he doesn't.

He stands stupidly and stares at Starclan. The green trees, the healthy grass, the sun breaking through the trees and making the forest glow. He takes it in. Something he'll always have to see but never have.

Sagestar's mind wanders as he sweeps his gaze over the sunlit place. What if he was better? What if he never killed Flickerfire? What if Snapstar was never born?

Finally, as the tom looks over Starclan's territory, and then at his paws, at the muddied line, at The Dark Forest behind him, he wonders:

What if he was on the other side?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

hi guys! this is the author's note... im not sure what to put here. first of all, thank you! you've probably heard that before tho, so I'm sorry I'm not more creative.

I guess I'll do special thanks tho!! I'll link them in comment!

First comment: _patches

Most comments: Valo6280

Faster commenter: Valo6280

More special thanks:

mothwings_felinepaws

Spiritsx

Okay! If you have any questions about the story put them here!! annnnnd questions for you:

least favorite part about the story:

least favorite scene in the story:

favorite part about the story:

favorite scene in the story:

and should i do a sequel, or leave this story be?:

Thank you to everyone!! it's been almost a year, and I'm so proud of

how far we've come! it's so bittersweet to see it end...but thank you to every person reading this, you've made it through!

Fan art and/or fan writings will be here:

[image]

this is Flickerfire, or Flick by the BEAUTIFUL SOUL mothwings_felinepaws !! IF I SEE ANY HATE YOUR BLOCKED AND YOUR COMMENT IS REPORTED I SWEAR IT'S BEAUTIFUL YOU CAN'T CHANGE MY MIND.

[image]

This is Sagestar, made by THE AMAZING PERSON BEING Dawnkit_Sunkit !! I'm actually flabbergasted!! Look at him!! His shading, his design (to a par, btw, did you reread the allegiance?????) Everything is PURE BEAUTY!!!! Again, don't hate OR I WILL FIND YOU ((((:

{head cannons!!!}

Okay soooo here's some tiny facts (and head cannons) about my characters!

1) Flickerfire, then Flickerpaw, was going to die in the river scene. I scrapped it because of my bigger plans that happened in his death!!

2) Fallowshard had a crush on Yewmist. Later on, she developed a huge crush on Flickerfire.

3) Plantkit dies later in life from a rock slide.

4) Myrtleblossom had autism.

5) Lacewing and Sagestar later make up in the Dark Forest and train together.

6) Flickerfire raises all kits in Starclan from all clans, which is why they all follow him like a flock.

7) In this universe, kits below the age of seeing, speaking, or walking, age to about a moon before they stop aging.

this will be my last part, thank you all for reading!! i hope you enjoyed!!

bye bye (and thank you.)

This is my first finished warrior cats book. ever. And idk, I don't wanna let it go. because it literally has so many memories attached. so so many. i've formed friendships off of this book. it has almost 6000 reads as of now. but the thing is, i never would've made it without you. and now i honestly just wont.

my other books are as special as this one. and its not because they're worse, it's because you guys are gone. and i'm not blaming yall at all! I'm so thankful. but it's almost impossible to find motivation with no one behind you. idk how i do it, and now im stopping.

im not going to be updating my stories anymore.

i know its kinda sad. i just didn't wanna do it on my message board, because it feels way less depressing this way.

and why am i doing it here? without this story, i'd have nothing on here. I love this book. I love this little (tiny, tiny) community. I can't explain how much you all mean to me. you guys made me feel seen, like my little cringy writings were really good.

to all my r4rs, you can keep reading or stop. i'm sorry i can't finish your amazing stories! i love you all, and you guys are all so amazing at writing!! (if you guys see this, if anyone sees this, thank you for every little interaction)

now i have a few people to thank. some of these people aren't active, but i hope they see this. i really do.

@mothwings_felinepaws : thank you for being the light of this app for me. your jokes and comments made my day. thank you for the flick fanart, i'll hold it close to my chest forever. thank you for reading everything i make. thank you for being there when i wasn't so good mentally. thank you so much for everything. i'll never forget you, and although i never met you in real life, i really hope

you know i love you like a real life friend!! (please dont be an 80 year old man lol)

@Valo6280 : not sure if your active anymore, but im so glad i got to meet you. you honestly made my book matter, with your quick replies and such. im so proud of your book. i hope you keep writing, even if i'll never read it. please keep being your amazing self, and keep lifting people up. your 'blanks' really made me smile sometimes. you never know how far a joke could go. thank you for everything you've done for me.

@Spiritsx : thank you for honestly just reading. although i never got too close with you, if you never read my book and commented so much, it would have never blown up like how it did. thank you, if you even see this. im so sorry i wont be ever to finish CM...good luck to Cresentpaw!

Theres so much more, but im crying rn and i dont feel like writing more. thank you all for the memories. i'm not gonna be active anymore, but this account will stay up. who knows...i've read plenty of books from 2016... maybe a teen in 5 years will read other side and love it. its worth trying.

and who knows, what if in 10 years i return to people saying 'im sad this account isn't active' and 'i love this book so much!' I'd literally cry. i know im not famous but i hope someone, anyone, sees this.

thank you everyone for reading this story, for reading these words. leave me sweet comments if you want! i'll prob be reading for maybe... 48 hours? then i wont be back. thank you so much for everything. please, you dont need to be overly kind, but no one knows how far one read, one joke, one compliment, can go. leave with that.

and finally, i love yall. bye bye, and thank you.